

¹ After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me." ¹¹ While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³ telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Judeans to this day. ¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came, saying to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ²⁰ and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:1-20

04/09/2023 – Easter Celebration

"NCIS Gibbs Rule #3b: Never Be Unreachable"

Rev. Amy Terhune, Saginaw First United Methodist Church

"I don't usually begin a sermon on a sad note like this, especially an Easter sermon, but sometimes we need to pause and remember what life is all about. A recent loss in the entertainment world went largely unnoticed. Larry LaPrise, the Detroit native who wrote several jingles and kids songs, most notably the song "The Hokey Pokey", died at age 93. He went peacefully, surrounded by family, having led a long, full, happy life. The family planned a service to celebrate his life, but imagine their surprise when they arrived at the funeral home to find a very frazzled funeral director. It seems that the staff was having trouble getting Larry into the casket. They put his left leg in and...well... that's when the trouble started." [traditional joke – original source unknown.]

It's been about two thousand years now since they had similar trouble in Jerusalem. Jesus just wasn't going to stay in that tomb. And it's not like they didn't try. Matthew's gospel goes into great detail about that. The end of chapter 27 reports that Joseph of Arimathea was given the body of Christ, but the temple officials were nervous that the body might be stolen as some kind of resurrection hoax by his disciples, so Pilate ordered that the tomb be sealed—presumably with cement—and a detachment of temple guards were assigned the duty of securing the tomb at all costs. In the Gospels of both Luke and Mark, the text reports that the women were going to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with the various spices and oils used in the preservation of the dead.

But when chapter 28 of Matthew opens, what does it tell us? It tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. They don't have any spices, because they're not going to anoint the body. They don't wonder to themselves who will roll away the stone, because they don't expect the stone to be moved. They're going to see the tomb, to mourn there, to grieve one who is now beyond all reach.

Reach. There's that word. You knew I was going to use it, given the sermon title for this morning. Today is the final sermon in this series using Gibbs' Rules from the hit CBS Crime Drama NCIS. Today, it's "never be unreachable", a rule which Gibbs' expects his team to follow unflinchingly. Gibbs himself is less reliable, frequently dropping his antiquated flip phone in his cup of coffee and tossing it in the trash when he doesn't want to talk to somebody. McGee and DiNozzo keep packages of flip phones stored in the file cabinet so that they can hook Gibbs up with a new one when he invariably destroys the current one.

But while Gibbs may be somewhat hypocritical, the good news today is that God is never unreachable. And by that, I mean that God is always accessible. Psalm 46 reminds us: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the world should change and the mountains shake to the heart of the sea..." That first Easter, the earth did shake, as if it couldn't stomach death any longer. The living, according to Matthew, become like dead men, while the man who had been dead lives again. The women who had come to see the tomb are invited to see instead that the place where he had laid is empty. It shows us the lengths God will go to in order to ensure – to prove - that God is never unreachable.

The scriptural record on God's abiding presence is profound. Burning bushes, parted seas, flooded landscapes, fiery furnaces, lion's dens, battlefields, royal palaces and widows huts and wilderness hide-outs – all of these are places where persons of great faith, and persons of enormous doubt, encountered God's very presence near to them in the most impossible circumstances. Today, we add to that list an empty tomb and two women who encounter the living Christ in their grief.

I recall going to visit a young couple in the hospital. They were expecting their first baby, and just three weeks before the due date, she grew concerned because she wasn't feeling movement. She went in to get checked out and sure enough, there was no fetal heartbeat. The baby had died in utero. Mind you, at this point, the nursery is painted, the crib is up, the baby shower has already happened, and all that baby stuff is all over the house. They have to go through labor and delivery knowing that the little one coming into the world has already died before it ever had a chance to live. Very few can really imagine what that's like. I was called into the hospital that afternoon to bless the body of the little one. I stopped in again the following morning to see how they were doing. She was off having some tests, and the young supposed-to-be father-to-be was alone in their room. And he began to tell me about not being able to sleep in the night, how he sat there while his wife slept and stared into space. There was crucifix on the wall, and he realized he'd been staring at it for quite some time before his mind realized what it was. But when he did realize, he found it comforting to think that God understood their suffering. And then he described how he suddenly felt a kind of warmth around him in the air, and a sense that God was there in that room with them, surrounding them. God understood. God was present. And he felt God's assurance, that while they would always carry this pain, in time, they would also know joy again, too. And one day, he would know this little one. And it comforted him. It gave him strength to be there for his wife. It gave him hope. If today shows anything, it's that God is never unreachable. God has never met a dead end.

Friends, Jesus Christ walked out of that tomb alive. And we know it because we experience God's presence, sometimes when we least expect it. God's life, God's love, God's power is accessible to us. It shapes us. It carries us. It drives us.

But you and I both know there's another way to understand unreachable, isn't there? The prophet Isaiah articulates it: For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways, and God's thoughts than ours...". (Isaiah 55:9). You and I are not God. God's unreachableness helps us understand our place, I suppose; our humanness, our frailty, our sin, our need. And that's important. But if God had wanted to remain unreachable, God would not have sent Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh, the Healer and Leader, the Crucified Redeemer, the Risen Lord. On the night Jesus was betrayed, he had supper with his disciples, and according to John's gospel, he gave them a whole sermon at the table. It goes on for four chapters, so I didn't read it today. But at one point, Philip says to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied", to which Jesus responds, "to see me is to see God! How do you not get this? But if you don't recognize God in me, at least believe what you see – the work I've been doing." And then Jesus says something very interesting. He says, "those who believe in me, those who love me, who love others as I love you, those who commit their lives to me, will not only do the work that I do but, in fact, will do greater work still, because I am going to the Father, and I'm sending an advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will be the power behind your love so that you will do things you can't begin to imagine." I'm paraphrasing a little, but that's John 14 in a nutshell.

We are not God, but we are called to be part of God's work in the world. We're called to try to live like Jesus. There are evil forces around us that have a vested interest in making us feel that we're insignificant, that we're powerless, that we're irrelevant. There are evil forces around us that have a vested interest in making us believe that nothing ever changes, that big dreams are foolish, that the systems and institutions of our social structure are forever mired in darkness and corruption. And some of those evil forces exist within the church – those who want to tell you that resurrection only applies to your heart, and to the life of the believer beyond death. Which is true. But incomplete. Today is the unequivocal answer to all forms of death and hopelessness. God never met a dead end. That applies to the grave. If you have lost one you love, know that the love between you has not yet run its course. Eternity awaits. God never met a dead end. That applies to people, certainly. To redeemed souls, reborn hearts, renewed lives. Nobody is beyond hope. Nobody is a nobody. Nobody is irredeemable. But it also applies to situations and circumstances. God can always redeem, renew, revitalize, resurrect. Eradicating poverty is not unreachable. Curing illness is not unreachable. Living together despite our differences is not unreachable. Reversing environmental degradation is not unreachable. Peace is not unreachable. And shame on anyone who tells you otherwise. And shame on anyone who suggests that faith has no bearing on the social ills and structures of our world. And shame on anyone who laughs at big dreams as pie-in-the-sky, fantastical nonsense. Resurrection is not small. Resurrection is pervasive. Live is victorious. Believe it, my friends, because there are some things that you simply must believe in order to see.

Go out into the world, into every nook and cranny, to every kind of people around the globe. Make disciples, baptize, teach, love. And I'll be with you, Jesus says. God is never unreachable. But of my friends, that rule applies to us as well. Let us follow God's lead. Never be unreachable. Open your minds, your hearts, your lives to the truth of resurrection. Let it be your power, your energy, your vision. Where others see deadbeats, see possibilities. Where others see despair, be hope. Where others know nothing but death, share the truth of God's life among us. Place yourself in God's care, in God's workforce, in God's reach.

Jesus Christ walked out of that tomb alive. And the women clung to him rejoicing. And the disciples worshipped him astonished. And lives were transformed. The Spirit moved, and a movement grew. And the world will never be the same. God is never unreachable. God never met a dead end. Oh, my friends, may the same be said of us. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen.