

Sermon (4/14/17, Matthew 28: 1-15):

It was my first ‘business trip’ in my new job following college graduation. I was one of those computer geek guys at a hospital in Florida – you know, the guy people loved to hate when their computer screen went unresponsive no matter how many keyboard keys they pounded on.

My task was to evaluate a new Main Frame system that had recently been installed at another hospital. The hospital bought me plane tickets, made reservations at a local hotel, rented me a car, even gave me cash for food and fuel. This was a really big deal! I was determined to not let my employer down. I studied up on this new system before I went. I wrote down questions I wanted to ask and things I needed to research while there. As good as this trust in me made me feel, I also felt nervous, even intimidated by the assignment. They were spending a lot of money on me for this trip. What if I let them down?

The trip went fairly well until it was time to go home. A storm came up making a mess of airline schedules. First came the delays, one after another. My anxiety went into high gear. I had a meeting to make the next day to report my findings. Carefully, I kept calculating my ever later departure times, trying to figure out if I could still make it home in time for my meeting.

Finally, they found a seat for me on a plane late in the afternoon to an airport where I was supposed to make a connecting flight. After a further long delay on the runway, we finally took off. By the time we landed, I had missed the connecting flight.

‘No more flights today.’ I was told when I arrived. ‘Best we can do is 11:00 AM tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow!’ I said. ‘I need to get back! People are waiting for me! This is my first business trip! I can’t let them down!’

The attendant shrugged her shoulders and handed me a small box.

‘What’s this?’ I asked.

‘We apologize for the inconvenience and we’d like you to have this complimentary toiletry kit with a bunch of nice little things to help you freshen up while you wait.’

I guess it was about then when I finally gave myself permission to laugh. It was one of those moments when it hits you that there’s not much you can do so you might as well go with the flow. No amount of griping and complaining is going to change things. No amount of wishing for a return to ‘normal’ will make that wish come true. The time had come to let the unexpected and uncontrollable have its way with me. This was my new normal. Besides, I always had my complimentary toiletry kit!

Matthew’s telling of the Easter story pushes us to adapt to a new normal. It refuses to allow us to retreat to places of safety. It is filled with fear inducing intrusions of the unexpected and earth moving upheavals that defy taming. In fact, it even began way back on the day we call ‘Good Friday’ when Jesus breathed his last breath. At that moment, the curtain in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. A violent earthquake shook the earth, splitting rocks in two. Even countless tombs in the neighborhood graveyard broke open and people, once dead, came back to life and entered the city!

I mean try to imagine yourself as one of the witnesses of this stuff. Suddenly, long dead Uncle Joe knocks on your door just in time for dinner. Aunt Margaret, who died years ago, catches your eye as she wanders through the gates of town looking as bewildered as those who are staring at her.

None of this is normal! In fact, it feels more like a horror

scene from a Zombie movie! At first, you think you're seeing things but eventually disbelief yields to fear. All that you were doing, thinking, considering, planning, working on, now seems irrelevant, even trivial. The world has shifted and the definition of 'normal' is up for grabs. We are not in Kansas anymore, as Dorothy famously said after landing in OZ. No amount of straining to make sense of things is going to figure this out. No amount of striving to get things back to normal is going to get you there.

On resurrection day, Mary Magdalene and Mary show up at the tomb and, almost as if on cue, the ground shifts with another earthquake. Unlike the other gospels, these poor women actually see an angel descend from heaven, push back the stone, and almost nonchalantly take a seat on it as if to say, 'There, that takes care of that.' The angel's appearance is blinding. The powerful Roman Guards faint to the ground like dead men, while the women, yes, the women, remain on their feet even as their heads spin with bewilderment.

Our afternoon adult enrichment group has been doing a study by N.T. Wright entitled 'Surprised by Hope'. A couple of weeks ago, we read and discussed a section on the resurrection. With Easter around the corner, the timing couldn't have been better. In this section, Wright points out the struggle the Gospel writers seemed to have when trying to describe the resurrection of Jesus. It's almost as if the Gospel writers couldn't find the words. Up until this point, Matthew has especially taken great pains to point out that Jesus was the Messiah the scriptures had predicted. Repeatedly, he uses phrases like, 'this was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophets'. All that seems to end when the resurrection happens. None of this, it seems, was predicted or

expected. For even those Jews who believed there would be a resurrection, this was not what they had in mind. None of this was ‘normal’ even according to the standards the prophets had set.

Which begs the question, what is normal? Have you ever asked yourself that question? Have you ever longed for normal?

I know I have. Plenty of times. When I’m lying in bed so sick that I can barely move, my longing is for healing so that my life can return to normal. As I stare up at the ceiling, suddenly, the routine of my days looks appealing – getting out of bed, taking a shower, heading off to the office, feeling hungry, having energy to get things done, even standing without feeling lightheaded. Oh, to feel normal again.

There was a time when protesting meant marching in the streets, creating placards to hold up for news cameras, writing letters to the editor, flooding the offices of Senators and Representatives with phone calls and notes, raising money and supporting candidates for office, maybe even staging a sit in to slow down traffic. Now a days it seems people protest by way of shootings at schools, nightclubs, and restaurants, mowing down people on sidewalks with a truck, strapping bombs to their bodies and blowing themselves up in crowded venues. Is this the new normal? Some days it feels like it and the word scary seems sorely inadequate to describe the depth of our fear and sorrow.

Few of us escape the loss of normal. Most prominent, perhaps, is the loss of a loved one. Few things are as disruptive and ruinous of normal than death. Nothing feels right anymore. Routines that centered on things we did together are now gone. Oh, how we long for normal.

In the grieving I have done, it’s always the little things that get me. The reaching for the phone to call my Mom only to realize

that she's not there to call. The once favorite seat of a loved one at the dinner table that now sits conspicuously empty. The eerie silence of those who aren't there to laugh at your lame jokes and teasing.

The loss of normal hurts magnificently at times and oh how we long for it to return. But what is normal? It's a term we use so often and so matter-of-factly but what does normal look like?

The writers of the Gospels struggled to find words to describe the resurrection. There was nothing normal about it. It was about as outlandish as things could possibly get.

Today, churches across the globe are filled more so than usual partly because it's what we normally do on Easter Sunday. It's traditional even though what we have gathered to celebrate is about as far from normal as things can get. Graveyards opening, angels descending, earthquakes moving the ground under our feet, soldiers fainting while the women stand strong, cemeteries turning into places of hope, a cross becoming a symbol of creation's redeeming. Is this the new normal? Is this one of those times when we need to stop trying to resist and just go with the flow of this new thing that God has set into motion? And if it is, what does this new normal look like? Mean?

I think we often come to church thinking that this is the place where we get things fixed. Got a problem? Feeling anxious? Tired of weeping? Looking for answers? Well, you've come to the right place. We can fix that. We can get things back to normal for you so you feel safe and secure again. The truth is, though, Easter isn't that. It's about earthquakes and the redefining of normal where all flesh and blood bodies matter. Jesus' spirit didn't leave Jesus' body in the tomb on that Easter Sunday. No, Jesus' body mattered. Our bodies matter. Our neighbor's body matters.

It needs to be respected, cared for, loved. The bodies of those who are counted as collateral damage after the smoke from bombings clear matter. They matter to God. They should matter to us. God loves us, bodies and all, no matter what our age, what our accent, what our nationality, what our political persuasion, what our immigration status, what our skin color is—we all matter. It's the reason why the tomb was empty, why Peter and John only found empty grave clothes in it...bodies matter. How we treat or disgrace our bodies and the bodies of others matters. This is Easter's new normal reverberating throughout the halls of history.

Creation also matters. Jesus pointed to it all the time as examples of the Kingdom of God—lilies in the field, sheep, goats, vines, branches, bread, wine, water. Easter is the first day of what God has defined as the building of the new heavens *and* the new earth. How we care for this planet, this creation God called good matters. It matters a lot. So much so, in fact, that how we care for it or abuse it says much about our faith's commitment to this new normal Easter demands.

Yes, as much as we use the term, the idea of normal tends to be fleeting, hard to nail down, even the source of our deepest longings in times of despair. But what if the real normal we are looking for is the normal only Easter can provide? True enough it's a normal that is enormously challenging to wrap our heads and hearts around but could it be that the day we decide to yield our lives to this new normal, this resurrection life we are already a part of, will also be the day when we finally discover what it's like to truly be alive? Yes, even if it doesn't include a complimentary toiletry kit!

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.