

Kids Stump the Preacher: He's Alive!!!

May 23, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 28:1-10

So today we are finishing up our series of messages titled “Kids Stump the Preacher” – looking at stories specially requested by the kiddos in the church. And for the last seven weeks we have had a lot of fun with these stories.

We started with the #1 most-requested story, and probably the #1 most well-known Bible Story by kids, and that is the story of Noah’s Ark. And we saw that even though this is a story that we kinda relegate to Children’s Bibles and nursery décor with all of the cute little animals, it is actually not a kids’ story. Like, at all. It is a story that reminds us of how far we can fall as human beings, and how deeply and painfully we break the heart of God when God goes to such great and powerful lengths to give us one chance, after another, after another.

Then the following week we turned to my son’s favorite story – the story of David and Goliath. And we learned a little bit about giants, and how they were real. And the genetic mutation that would cause giants. But along with that, we saw that things are not always as they seem. That big and scary, does not necessarily mean strong and agile. And little and unintimidating does not mean incapable. And we saw what can happen when we can stop trying to be everybody else, and we show up with the little bit that we have, and allow God to use that. That is when miracles happen.

We entered into the story of Jonah, that story that hits painfully close to home in so many ways for me – and we were reminded that sometimes just being a prophet – just being a child of God – just calling ourselves a Christian – doesn’t always mean that much if we aren’t willing to follow where God leads us. And we also saw that we serve a God who can work in and through literally *everything* – from the biggest, most massive weather systems to the smallest and most insignificant creatures like a worm. Plants. Animals. Pagans. Enemies. Doesn’t matter. God is God of everybody – even those who don’t recognize God and those who work actively against God. And when God’s people throw our head in the sand and refuse to *be* God’s people, God will still accomplish great things – and we may be surprised by the people and things God chooses to work through.

We told the story of Daniel and the Lion’s Den, delving a little bit into the history of Israel and what happened during the time and following the time of the exile. We heard the origin stories of groups of people like the Samaritans, and the diaspora Jews, that will crop up later as we move into the New Testament. And we were reminded of Jeremiah’s words to those in exile – to work for the good of the city where you find yourselves. To bloom where you are planted. To seize the moment right now and stop

living in yesterday. To remember that wherever we are – safe at home or in a strange land; in Judah or in Babylon; kneeling down to pray or facing down the jaws of the lions – that God goes with us and never leaves us alone.

Two weeks ago on Mother's Day we also celebrated Christmas again, remembering the story of Mary and her really crazy, wonky pregnancy that did not end at all like she had planned, and all of the ways that she had to keep adjusting, and adjusting some more, and adjusting some more, when all she really wanted was a comfortable bed and a good night's sleep. And we were reminded that sometimes life happens. The unexpectedly tragic. The painful. The uncomfortable. The unconscionable. And yet, in the midst of all of these twists and turns and frustrations and struggles is also a deep and profound joy that God brings amidst all of the mess.

And then today, we are entering into a story that we heard told really recently. Less than two months ago. And that is the Easter story. The resurrection story. I think it's really beautiful that the two stories that the kids picked from the New Testament signal the two most powerful, joy-filled, celebrations that the church has: Christmas and Easter. The birth of Christ and the resurrection of Christ.

Two powerful miracles – the first one being the miracle that we have a God who cares enough about us to come and to live life among us – to take on flesh and blood; to feel what we feel and struggle with what we struggle with and be tempted just like we are tempted and to be challenged just like we are challenged. We have a God who doesn't just sit back on a throne in heaven with a crown on his head and not a care under the sun, but we have a God who wants to be *in it* with us, and God will do whatever it takes to show us just how seriously God takes his desire for relationship with us.

And then the second miracle is one that reminds us that God doesn't just want to be a part of our lives; God doesn't just want to feel our pains and bring us comfort – but God wants to *redeem* our lives. God wants to restore our hope and our joy. God wants to overcome sin and death, once and for all, so that we might be able to experience eternity with God. Not just the presence of God with us now, but the presence of God with us *forever*.

And so that leads us to today's scripture reading – the story of the resurrection, as told by Matthew. In Matthew's gospel, there is one underlying theme that pretty much permeates throughout the story – and that is the theme of fear. From the moment the story begins to the very end, every single heart is thumping out of its chest.

First, we have what's going on behind the scenes. The chief priests and the Pharisees were afraid – they were afraid of Jesus' followers. Afraid that his followers would go and steal the body to try to make it look as if Jesus had been raised from the dead. Maybe even a little bit afraid that perhaps, if Jesus had been who he said he was, maybe he *would* actually be raised. A long shot, an irrational fear, maybe – but a fear that was

there nonetheless. And so they went to Pilate and expressed this fear, and Pilate ordered that the guards “make the tomb as secure as they knew how.” Don’t spare any expense. Beef up security. Do whatever you can to make absolutely certain nobody – human or divine – can get into or out of that tomb. The disciples are not allowed in, and Jesus is most certainly not allowed out. The religious leaders are terrified that something is going to happen.

And then, there’s the women – Mary and Mary. In the last chapter, we are told that Joseph of Arimathea laid Jesus’ body to rest, and rolled the stone over the entrance to protect it, and that “The Marys” were right there watching everything happen. They saw the body go into the tomb. They saw it get sealed up. They saw the guards outside the tomb. But then, we are told in today’s reading that Mary and Mary “went to look at the tomb.” Why, Matthew doesn’t tell us. It wouldn’t have been to anoint the body – they knew that the tomb was sealed and they would not be able to enter in. I think that maybe they just needed to go back and see for themselves that the events of the previous day had not, in fact, just been one big nightmare. To remind themselves that, yes, it did really happen, and that yes, Jesus really *was* dead, and yes, the guards were really still there. And maybe to have a few minutes to themselves there at the grave, in much the same way that you or I might go put flowers on a loved one’s grave.

And a big part of them was afraid of what they might find. Would the guards be mean? Would they try to interrogate the women? Would they threaten them? What would the tomb look like in daylight? Would it feel more real? Would they break down in tears, or would they just feel numb? Would they feel anything at all?

But for all of their what-ifs, they never expected to see what they saw when they got there. An earthquake. And not just any earthquake – a violent earthquake. And then, an angel. Rolling the sealed stone aside (or, some commentators say that the way the word “roll” is used in the Greek, it’s more like the angel picked up the stone and threw it aside, and then went and sat on it). It was such a magnanimous display of power and the guards are so terrified, that they basically have a seizure and lose consciousness.

“Do not be afraid,” the angel tells them. As if, that was even an option. As if they could *choose* not to be afraid after what they had just witnessed. “I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.” So this angel can see their hearts – their intentions – their desires. He could read their minds. That’s probably as scary as anything else.

“Jesus is not here. He is risen. Just as he said he would. Look. Come and see for yourselves.”

And when they were satisfied that what the angel said to them was true, the angel said “Go. Quickly. Go tell his disciples what you have seen. Spread the word.”

And then the women go. Afraid, but filled with joy. And who do they meet on the road, but Jesus himself. No longer dead. And Jesus tells them, almost word for word what the angel had already said. "Do not be afraid." And "Go and tell."

Honestly, I am in complete awe of these two women. I don't know that I would've had the gall or the stamina or the wherewithal to go to the tomb in the first place that morning. I probably would have been with the disciples – locked behind a closed door and jumping at every sign of movement. Going and facing down Roman soldiers at daybreak? Not my cup of tea. Enduring earthquakes and angel-assisted rock slides? Coming face-to-face with previously-dead people? Yowza.

But then, after all of that – keeping my wits about me? And allowing *joy* to enter in, in the middle of the fear? I think that was a miracle in and of itself. Because that joy could have meant only one thing: Not only did they experience all of the overwhelming events of that morning – not to mention the traumatizing events of the previous day – but they were tuned in enough to understand what it all meant, for the world and also for them. They were afraid, absolutely. Of course. But they would not allow their fear to get in the way of the joy that God was pouring into them. They could be both, at once. Afraid – overwhelmed – not really knowing or understanding the full impact of what had just happened – and yet still knowing above all else that God was still alive and moving and breathing and working and overcoming and sustaining and reviving and raising Jesus and all of us to new life.

Friends, sometimes this life can get absolutely crazy. Sometimes things happen that are absolutely terrifying. Sometimes we don't understand how everything is working together for good, because there are times and seasons in life when it feels like we are stuck in a neverending loop of Good Fridays – where every time the phone rings or every time we turn on the news or every time we walk outside or...or...or...something else goes wrong. A loved one is having a hard time. We trip and fall and break something. We lose our job, or lose a client, or lose people who are close to us. We struggle to understand how to walk through life in this weird, nebulous time that we are walking through right now: Do I wear a mask, or don't I? Do I give a hug, or shake a hand, or do I maintain distance? Do I go see someone in person, or do I just call them on the phone? What are they comfortable with? What am I comfortable with? Will this ever stop feeling so awkward?

Do I go to the tomb, or do I stay home? Do I engage the guards, or do I do my own thing? And then just when we are feeling like we are totally swimming in questions, the ground starts to tremble, and we are struck with another question: Is this earthquake more bad news, or is this God showing up?

Mary and Mary chose to believe that the earthquake was a sign of the presence and the power of God, and because God is who they expected, they were afraid when God

showed up, but they were not paralyzed – and they were seized not by terror, but by joy – even in the midst of life's most painful struggles.

So my friends, let me ask you today: in the midst of the chaos of life, in the midst of everything that there is to be afraid of – when the ground begins to tremble and the rug gets pulled out from underneath us, are we expecting to see God staring us in the face?

Because I promise you – if God is who we are expecting, God is who we will see. And we *will* be filled with joy. And we *will* be raised to new life.