

Resurrection Faith

[Matthew 28:1-20](#)

Rev. Abigail Henderson

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There is a meme going around on social media that I love.

Just so we're all the same page, a meme is an image, video, or piece of text that is copied (often with small variations) and spread rapidly by Internet users.

The meme I want to tell you about first caught my eye when it was shared on Facebook by First UCC's own Trish Beckman, associate professor of religion at St. Olaf. I saw it shared many times after that, which is what happens when your network is dominated by fellow clergy and religion PhDs.

The meme is simply this: a block of text stating, "In the interests of biblical accuracy, all the preaching about the resurrection this Easter Sunday will be done by women."

It was fun to comment on Trish's post and say, "On it."

The meme speaks to the fact that all four of our canonical Gospels feature women as the very first witnesses to the resurrection. Although each Gospel has its own version of the story, the women are always, *always* a stand-in for the reader, for us: their grief is our grief. Their fear is our fear. Their joy is our joy.

And the Gospel writers hope that their faith will be our faith.

But the meme points to an irony as well. Despite the crucial role that women play in the story of the resurrection, we know that most of the preaching done today, across the vast majority of Christendom, will not be done by women.

This makes me all the more grateful that I grew up taking women preachers for granted. As many of you know, my mother is an ordained United Church of Christ minister, now retired. My first time in the pulpit was *in utero*, when she started serving a new church while nearly 40 weeks pregnant with me.

One of my earliest memories is lying on the rug in my parents' study, pretending to write a sermon *just like her*. It was the early 80s, and she would write her sermons longhand on pads of yellow legal paper. She gave me my own pad and pen, and although I couldn't yet write, I

remember scrawling these jagged lines across the page, mimicking her handwriting.

The great thing about inheriting the family business is that you have a built-in consultant for all those details about ministry they didn't teach you in seminary. You should've heard the panicked phone call when I was a baby pastor about to preside over my first graveside burial: "MOM? What do I do?!"

So of course I've talked to my mother about what it means to preach about the resurrection. She said, "Oh, you'll hear a lot of advice for preachers on Easter Sunday. Advice such as: Be brief. Be simple. Be entertaining.

But the best advice *I've* ever heard is this: *be honest.*"

My mom has taught me a lot about honesty, as both a mother and a minister.

About the same time that I was a toddler, lying on the floor of the study and pretending to write sermons, my mother was going through a brutal experience. It was 1984. She was about the age I am now, and her younger brother, Peter, a beautiful, talented gay man, was dying from AIDS in a New York City hospital.

My mother has told me about what it was like to go back and forth between her small New England church and the intensive care unit in Brooklyn. The former wasn't sure what to make of the latter. So she told them. In her preaching, in her teaching. She was honest. She told the truth, at a time when the truth felt impolite, and messy, and terrible.

As many of you will remember, the disease was barely understood at the time. The profound shame and stigma around AIDS, around being gay—it was beyond words. Fear ruled the day. Many of Peter's nurses were scared to touch him, even with gloves on.

So my mother and her mother kept vigil at his bedside, tending to him themselves, their hearts breaking. They were experiencing that particular, awful, inconsolable emptiness that comes only from hope crushed.

Picture my mother and grandmother—how they *felt*—and now picture the women from the Gospel of Matthew, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary.

While it was still dark, the two Marys got up somehow, their arms and legs aching with grief. They made their slow way through the

deserted streets, and through the gates of the ancient walled city. The guards posted there would've paid no attention to a pair of weeping women.

It was a terrible time for Jesus' friends and followers; the last, bitter leg of a journey that had seemed to have failed. For Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, the dawn was not bringing a new day, but only the numb duty of last respects. They were fulfilling their sacred Jewish obligation to tend to the body of their beloved friend, to return to him the dignity that crucifixion had stripped away.

And then, Matthew writes, *the earthquake*.

A force from nowhere that brought an angel with it, and caused the stone to roll away from the mouth of the tomb. That stone was as heavy as the women's hearts; the stone was as hard as those guards who were put there to seal Jesus' defeat.

That heavy stone had been moved.

Every gospel resurrection story is different, and Matthew's gives us *earthquakes*. The Greek word he uses, *seismos*, as in "seismic," means shaking. The guards shook and became like dead men. And

we can guess that the women shook too, because the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid. Do not fear. Or, as in the King James Version says, “Fear not.” Fear *not*, even though your foundations are shaking. Fear not, even as you meet up with lightning face to face—an angel sitting right where your heart’s love is buried.

And, as long as we’re being honest, is this realistic counsel?

Of course those women are afraid.

Honestly, I’m afraid too, a lot of the time.

And so are you, I bet.

We are afraid with a fear that comes from believing that there is not enough to go around: not enough time, not enough joy, not enough strength, not enough love.

We are afraid that the choices we have made, that the paths we have taken, will not bring us to the place we had in mind.

It's a fear that comes from knowing that all our human smarts and skill and power have not kept us from killing each other, or fouling our nest, or forsaking our young. The world for which we have been so carefully preparing is being taken away from us.

Of course we're afraid!

We know about earthquakes. We've seen literal earthquakes destroy cities. We've seen man-made earthquakes—terrorism, gun violence, climate change, the refugee crisis, sexual abuse scandals, and recently, fires—fires that consume forests and historically black churches and ancient towering cathedrals.

Not to mention the ferocious personal shaking that comes when you lose your job, or get bad news from your doctor, or realize that all those dreams you had for yourself or your child aren't working out. Many of us know those earthquakes as well.

So the last thing that any of us need is a platitude. The last thing we need is to be fed a faith that pretends none of this is happening, or that it doesn't really matter, or that that it shouldn't hurt the way it does. The last thing we need is an Easter story that lies to us, that tells us that if we believe the right thing or live the right way, we'll

never have to witness another crucifixion or approach another empty tomb.

But listen: the faithful life is *not* a down comforter tucking us in all nice and warm and safe and unchanging.

No, I would like to suggest that faith – at least the resurrection faith we proclaim today – is more like an earthquake than a comforter. It is a great shift, a sorting out, a disconnect, an upending, a disturbance. It can stand us on our feet, but first it brings us to our knees.

Easter speaks to anyone who has ever been brought to their knees.

Easter speaks to anyone who has ever begged God to give them back what they have lost.

Easter speaks to those who have ever felt out of place, out of sorts, out of mind, outdone, down and out, just plain out.

I believe the purpose of resurrection faith is *not* to soothe our fears. Not completely. If it were, the story might go this way: Mary Magdalene would fall at Jesus' feet and say, "Thank God you're back, Rabbi, to make things all right again; and, by the way, please, no more earthquakes!"

And Jesus would say, “I got this.”

The story seems to tell us this instead: “Circumstances are indeed very scary, and we are not sure what will happen next, but keep telling this story of new life and you can live *with* that fear. It will not overcome you.”

Maybe that means, “Trust in God’s passionate love of you, even in the earthquake, *especially* in the earthquake.

Trust that there is no resurrection faith without tears. Trust that the story is not over, that however large your reality is, it is not large enough to contain God’s truth and power. Trust that you are moving toward – toward what? Only God knows.”

Easter faith exposes many of our fears for what they are: attachment to that which is passing away, an understandable attempt to save ourselves, or rather to save an outdated version of ourselves. We cannot cling to the hope that our faith will take us back, or keep things the same, or predict the future.

When my mother sat at her brother Peter's hospital bedside in 1984, watching his slow and painful death, the truth of the situation was almost too real and too tender to bear.

How could my mother know that this experience would shape her life and ministry, helping other families impacted by AIDS to share their stories and making space, real space, for LGBTQ people in the church?

How could she guess that thirty-five years later, her own daughter, Peter's niece, an openly queer woman preacher, would be in a pulpit, telling this very story?

How could she know then that Peter's life, his precious, brief life, would influence *my* life in profound ways, even though he and I shared this earth for only three years?

How could she anticipate that the truth of that heavy time would become a lighter burden over the years, a shared yoke?

How could she even begin to imagine?

And so let us wonder:

What redemption, what salvation, what new life might be waiting for us, each of us, all of us, just beyond our field of vision?

It probably won't look at all like what we've lost. It probably won't be anything we can foresee. It won't erase our pain.

But our sacred story tells us that this new life will belong to God, and will be *good*.

Hear again Jesus' promise: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus was the ultimate meme, if you think about it: copied and shared, *with variation*, over and over again.

Jesus lived and died and lives again; we get in his way, we thwart his Good News, and somehow, resurrection still happens. And we are the keepers of that sacred story of death defeated, as it happened then and as it happens now, in us and through us and in spite of us.

The resurrection story is a thread through time, connecting all of us who seek to know the Mystery of God through Jesus, from those very first women at the empty tomb, to anyone sitting in pews today, hoping

for a sign that we shouldn't give up, that fear and despair are not the most powerful forces in the universe.

We're searching for faith that can endure earthquakes, and into our searching, God's word speaks, with unflinching honesty and love:
Christ is risen, indeed.

Alleluia and Amen.