

“Plan B”

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Easter Sunday
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Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

When Mary Magdalene and the other women made a decision to follow Jesus, they surely didn't know that they were following him to the cross. And early in the morning on the first day of the week, when they went to his tomb, bleary-eyed with grief, their plan was to anoint him with spices, according to Mark's gospel.

We humans like to think that we are good at planning. When someone asks us where we want to be in our lives in five years, we learn early on that we should really have an answer. We're good at establishing the illusion that life is under our control. Set a vision for your life. Determine specific strategies. Identify action steps. Construct a timeline, with specific mileposts along the way. Monitor progress. Adjust if you must. Voila! Goal achieved.

Except that, as the disciples discovered, life often doesn't play out according to our plans. Sometimes, when the worst happens, when we can no longer maintain the illusion that we control or even know what will happen next, God does God's best work. God comes up with Plan B.

Picture the scene: two women walking down a road in Jerusalem just at dawn. Maybe they don't even notice that it promises to be a beautiful day. Three days earlier, they sat at the foot of the cross, watching their friend and the one they had come to believe to be the savior of Israel die. On Friday at the conclusion of the Faith Walk here in town, I could barely stand to look at a very sanitized reenactment of a triple crucifixion. What must it have been like for them to watch?

Perhaps by Sunday morning, the women have reached that stage of intense mourning when there are no more tears to flow--when there is nothing left to say. Perhaps they walk quietly, not even talking.

Then, the dawn's quiet is interrupted by a great, ground-shaking earthquake, but that's just the warm-up act. A snow-white angel, his appearance as bright as lightning, rolls back the stone at the entrance to the tomb and takes a seat. *“For fear of him, the guards shook and became like dead men.”*

The angel tells the women not to be afraid. If that was his goal, maybe the angel should have chosen a different entrance, I think.

When you're a pastor, people give you a lot of likenesses of angels. I like them—they're cheery and joyful. This one is kind of triumphant. This one is prayerful. Here's a beautiful musical angel. Baby angels are even cuter. Here's an angel feather—it's all so sweet and comforting.

But Biblical angels are another species entirely. First of all, they're almost always male. Very scary males. Their message is rarely one of comfort or protection. They have a message and some instructions to impart. They tell of God's Plan B, and they give people specific instructions to go and to do some scary things.

What does this resurrection account, which begins after Plan A seems to have failed miserably, tell us about God's Plan B?

In the face of the worst, in the face of great sadness, fear, and death, angels appear in unexpected guises and ways. They aren't necessarily comforting at the time, but they do encourage mortals to put away our fears: *"Do not be afraid,"* the angel tells the women. *"Do not be afraid,"* Jesus tells them, too. Death did not win. Fear should not win either.

The angel's next instructions? Do not stay at the tomb. Death did not win. *"Go quickly and tell,"* the angel instructs them. Tell the disciples that *"he has been raised from the dead, and indeed, he is going ahead of you to Galilee."*

"Go and tell," Jesus instructs them. Share the good news of what God has done for you, how God's plan is so much grander than and different from yours. Go and tell how, with God, the end was just the beginning.

And when the women overcome some of their fear and rush to share the good news—when they become the messengers--then the angel says, *"He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him."*

But what's even more amazing is this: Jesus does not even wait until Galilee; he appears to his friends right then and there with greetings! And he sends them on their way with a promise that the disciples *"will see me."*

That's the simple lesson of how we are to react to the Easter story, to all the big and little Easters of our lives. We might see some scary angels, but we are not to be afraid. We are to leave the tomb behind and "go and tell" what God has done for us. Tell how we had Plan A all figured out, until it all went down very differently. Tell how God came up with Plan B--how God always has and God always will.

And then, then, we will see the risen Jesus in unexpected places, maybe even sooner than he promised. When that happens, do not be afraid. Worship him. Worship him and go and tell. Amen.