

- The Gospel for this Easter is from Matthew. Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher and behold, there was a great earthquake. For an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow, and for fear of him, the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, do not be afraid. For I know what you seek Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, he is risen, as he said. Come see the place where he lay. Then, go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead, and behold. He is going before you into Galilee. There you will see him. Lo, I have told you. So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, hail. And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, do not be afraid. Go, tell my brothers to go to Galilee and there they will see me. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. What does God look like? First John says no one has ever seen God. A little girl was laboring over a drawing, and her teacher looked over her shoulder and said dear, what are you drawing? And she said, God. And the teacher said, dear, no one has ever seen God. Nobody knows what God looks like. The little girl responded, well they will when I'm done, won't they? (congregation laughs) Now most of us past kindergarten no longer ask what does God look like? But we do ask, what is God like? Is God good? Is God compassionate? Does God act? Whose side is God on? These questions seem particularly pressing this year. Yesterday I noted to a student how in the chapel, on our Good Friday services, we had a large number of worshipers this year. And I said I'm sure it's because we had Peter Storey. A really good preacher was preaching on Friday, that's why we had the big crowds. And the student said, ya know, I think so many people are there, because so many people wonder, what is God up to now? And I collected sermons from campus ministries after September the 11th, and I noticed that this was a theme running through those sermons. People, we've experienced a terrible, horrible evil, but God is in charge, God is in control. The sermons did seem a little defensive. But maybe we pastors knew that an event like September the 11th, it makes people ask, well what is God like? God's honor was at stake here. The terrorists were convinced that God was on their side. Who is God? God is the righteous warrior against decadent American imperialism. And yet many times in the weeks following, we heard the prayer, God bless America. In God we trust, meaning we trust that God is the sort of God who would bless America. Talk of this kind begs the question, what is God like? The women go out to the cemetery on Easter morning, and they're seeking Jesus who was crucified. Note they're not looking for Jesus the teacher. They're not looking for Jesus the great healer. They're looking for Jesus whose beautiful words and great deeds are now completely overshadowed by the horribly violent, unjust, cruel way of his dying. It was now his dying that determined him, Jesus who was crucified. The Gospel of Matthew began by saying upfront, this is Jesus the messiah. The messiah, Jesus. Messiah's the one who comes to set things right. Comes to fix everything that's wrong. And now that messiah is dead. Not only dead, but crucified, the worst of the most publicly humiliating of deaths. A crucified messiah, isn't that an oxymoron? The women do not go out to the cemetery looking for Jesus the messiah, they're looking for Jesus who was crucified. And death has a way of doing that. Death is always big and bad, and violent, unjust death is even more so. How many times since September the 11th have people made comments like, our world is changed forever. Big bad death. More than once on this campus, I've heard students say, it's kind of sad, but I bet my whole

life will be overshadowed by those crumbling, falling towers on September the 11th. And sure enough, there are people who want to label this generation of young adults the 9/11 generation. This is the day that changed America forever, said Larry King ad nauseum. Death, horribly violent death, particularly, does that. It defines, it deterministically, imperialistically overshadows everything. Powerful, all-powerful death, you really got us this time. The women come out looking for Jesus who was crucified. All the good Jesus had done, all his wondrous works swept away in a few hours on a Friday. Jesus, the crucified. For 28 chapters, Matthew has been telling us that Jesus was sent from God, that Jesus was the very son of God. But now in this cataclysmic death and violence, death has devoured all his days. And if you've been through death recently, if you've had someone that you love die, you know this is one of the cruelest things about death, it just seems to devour the memories and the moments and the voice and the touch and everything, it's death. So the women, the courageous but despondent women get to the tomb, and there they're met by an angel impudently sitting on this stone that the angel has pushed away, and the angel says, he is not here! He's not here at this place of death. He's been raised! Note the verb is in the passive tense. The angel doesn't say he is raised or Jesus raised himself from the dead. The angel said he has been raised. He couldn't raise himself, the crucified one. The ultimate passivity, he was dead. He wasn't in a coma, he wasn't sleeping, he was dead. And now the announcement, he has been raised. By whom? Surprise. If you thought the chief priest, if you thought the mob, if you thought Pilate, the disciples were the only actors in this drama, surprise. There is another actor, one who acts. And by that act, Jesus is raised. And what does that tell you about God? At the ending of the trial, she stood before the cameras and she said, this is a great day for us. For by this verdict, the truth is out, and we feel we have been vindicated. The resurrection is God's verdict on Good Friday. God's vindication of Jesus. What we got here is not just another miracle like the resuscitation of Lazarus, or the turning of water into wine. What we got here is a statement, the statement of who God is and what God is about. What God is up to in the world. God is the one who raised a crucified messiah. Easter, Easter is not first of all a statement about the final destiny of our souls, the raising of our dead. It's not about heaven. It is about first the vindication of dead Jesus. It's not that God raised Jesus from the dead. It is that God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus. The one whose love evoked such violence and rejection. Jesus the one who stood up to the principalities and powers. Jesus, who badgered the rich and blessed the poor. That Jesus was raised, enthroned, thereby validated. His way vindicated. Now, once Jesus was loose, where did he go? And I've always found this curious. Now one might've thought that upon being raised from the dead, Jesus would've maybe gone up to the palace to where important people do their work. He would've gone up and he would've appeared triumphant. He would've sought out Pontius Pilate. He would've gone into the Oval Office and said, Pilate, you made a big mistake. (congregation laughs) Now it's payback time. Or at least maybe he would've gone to the clergy, to the keepers of religion. He would've gone up to the temple. He would've said you idiots, you think you know so much about religion, go back to your Bibles one more time, people, I'm back. No, he appears first to the women. And then to his disciples out in Galilee. Not to the rich and powerful people. The people I'm always trying to snuggle up next to. The sort of people Jesus never got on with during his ministry. He appears to this rag-tag bunch of riff raff. These half-hearted disciples out in a backwater place called Galilee. Now what does that tell you about God? It appears it is the nature of this God to forgive. It is the nature of this God to work through the lowly, not to go to Washington or Moscow or Jerusalem, preferring to work out there in Galilee. And this is good news. If you're a woman, if you're a half faithful second-rate disciple, if you're stuck in some backwater town, God vindicated that. God put a stamp of approval on that. God raised Jesus, the crucified. And what do we do

with that? Around here from time to time, you meet people who feign theological humility when it comes to knowledge of God. God, oh God, that's just too high, that's too grand, that's just too large, mysterious to be comprehended by us. God is a spirit, he's infinite, unchangeable, indefinable. We can't say anything one way or another about God. I'm not like those Muslim fundamentalists who think they know so much about God. I am too intellectually humble to say anything for sure about God. Oh, we wish. (congregation laughs) Such evasions are often a sign not of intellectual humility, but of modern arrogance. The refusal to believe that almighty God would lower himself to become as a Jew who was whipped and stripped and nailed to the wood and hung up to die and then powerfully raised on the third day. Jesus, Jesus who came back to his 12 very best friends and most notable betrayers, Jesus. He forgave them, he said the revolution starts here, people. And you're in charge, everything I've got's yours, go! Because if that's true, if Jesus is not only the crucified one, but the one who has been raised by God, vindicated, well God's got a face and a name and a way that is difficult and demanding. We can't make God into anything we like, because on Easter God has made himself into what he likes. If you want to know God, if you crave a clue as to what God is up to, then after Easter, you've got to look at Jesus, the one whose work and way God vindicated by raising him from the dead. Maybe, you see, that's why the predominant Easter emotion was fear. When the risen Christ encountered those women on their way back out from the cemetery, that's what he said to them. You think he would say, rejoice! He says, fear not. Don't be afraid. Why would he tell them now don't be afraid? Here's what I think. This story, the women's discovery that Jesus was on the loose, that death had been defeated, it ends out in Galilee. The risen Christ appears to his disciples, that is his 12 closest friends who are best able to see that the risen one is also the crucified one. Jesus's disciples, and later Matthew says some of them doubted and some worshiped, and well, the followers of Jesus are always a mixed bag whether you find them in Galilee or in Durham. And the risen Christ appears to them. And that means to us. And that's a little scary. One night I was perusing with a group of students, dormitory Bible study toward the end of the Gospel of Matthew, and we read the last words in the Gospel of Matthew, the risen Christ says to his disciples, now, go out into all the world and make more disciples and baptize them and teach them that all I've commanded you and lo, I am with you always even until the end of the age. Hand goes up. Um, did he mean that lo, I'm with you always, did he mean that like as a promise or a threat? (congregation laughs) And I said, well I gather you've met Jesus before. (congregation laughs) I gather you know something about his work. You therefore understand that when Jesus, the risen Christ stood among them and raised from the dead, this was not perceived as unadulterated good news by those who knew him best. Jesus. Raised from the dead, comes all the way out to Galilee to meet with his best friends and biggest betrayers, and there he says, lo, I am with you always. I had only about three years to harass you before the government got organized and did the cross. I only had about three years to hammer you people and judge you and transform you. But now I'm raised from the dead. I'm vindicated! I'm with you always! You'll never be able to get rid of me now.