

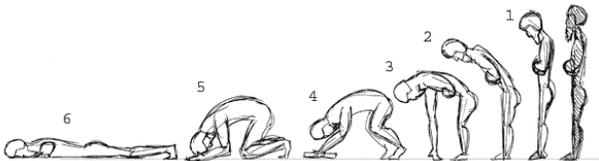
General Conference, Morning Worship, May 20, 2016

“Leave the Tomb Quickly”

Bishop Elaine JW Stanovsky¹

Matthew 27: 62 – 28:8 (NRSV) *The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, “After three days I will rise again.” Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, “He has been raised from the dead”, and the last deception would be worse than the first.’ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.’ So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.*

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This is my message for you.’ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.



At the beginning of the Conference in the Episcopal Address, Bishop Palmer told us he had “a picture in [his] mind of us in this room, as each one is able, laying prostrate before the Lord our maker divesting ourselves, if only for a moment, a season, of our pride of place, prestige, rank, position and power.”²⁴ I awoke this morning humble. And desiring humility. Yearning to become a humble community in which we each great one another as we would greet Christ if we met him on the road. We would, and we do meet Christ on the road. Don’t the ancients teach us to look for Christ in every stranger? Here we are, gathered as strangers to one another, from different lands, unable to speak the same language. A community of strangers. How do we find Christ in one another? I awoke this morning drawn to humble myself before God, and before the Church, before you. To bow and to bend; to say with my body what I feel in my heart: God, I don’t know if your children can live together in the church. I don’t know how, when one speaks, all will hear in their own language. I don’t know how we can understand each other deeply enough to recognize Christ through all the difference and strangeness. I don’t know. I can’t see. I am brought low.

I don't know if the bishops can lead the Church as it needs us to. I don't know if delegates can hear the truth of one another's lives in a way that leads us closer to God, and deeper in faithfulness.

Will you join me, as you are able, to humble yourselves before God. First stand, or sit with straight back, present yourself before God – not proud, but present. Then, bow your head ever so slightly, while keeping your back straight. Now bend at the hips, forward, head down. And again, deeper, hand folded, until you are looking at the floor. Hold there a moment. As I pray an ancient prayer of the Church. *Lord, Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* You may pray along in your own languages.

Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And as we return to standing, one more time,

Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

May we seek Christ in one another today and all days.

Matthew: Echoes from the Past

We've been given a scripture to enlighten our day. It is a gospel invitation to *cross-over*, from death to LIFE.

I want to ask you a simple true or false question. Don't shout out your answer just yet. You will have a chance in a minute. True or false? Jesus is dead.

Let me put another way. This time you can answer: true or false? Christ is risen!

HE IS RISEN, INDEED!

We just heard Matthew's version of what happened after Jesus was "crucified, dead and buried."³ We don't know who wrote the Gospel of Matthew. Imagine with me that she was a woman, a storyteller. Crowds of people had followed Jesus. They didn't know if the power they experienced with him on the hillside, at the seashore, in towns and villages had survived his death. But our storyteller was convinced that Jesus was the living presence of God on earth. People's lives had been changed! And she was absolutely dedicated to keeping his story alive.

Salvaging fragments from other stories, she wove a story intended to assure Jewish Christians that "the hopes and fears of all the years"⁴ were fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus. She included references and resonances from two ancient and beloved stories: the Exodus from slavery and crossing over the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land, so that her readers would recognize that the God who resurrected Jesus Christ is the very same God who saved and delivered the children of Israel throughout the ages.

Just listen to a few of the echoes:

Passover or Cross over.⁵ When the storyteller tells us that Jesus gathered with his disciples for a Passover feast (Mt 26:2, NRSV) her listeners remembered the first Passover. The Hebrew root is *abar*, which means *cross over* or *pass-over* and refers to a wide variety of threshold crossings. You remember that before God led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness – before the Exodus – God sent ten plagues to convince Pharaoh to let the people go. The last of these plagues was

death of the firstborn children in the land: from the firstborn son of Pharaoh to the firstborn of a slave girl, to the firstborn cattle, they all died. But God *passed-over* the Hebrew homes, saving their children (Ex 12:11ff). Every year Jewish people celebrate Passover to remember how God saved them. Then, as they ran from Pharaoh's army, God parted the Red Sea and they *crossed over* on dry land (Josh 4:23). Forty years later, they *crossed over* the Jordan River with Joshua into the Promised Land (Josh 1:11). When Jesus *crosses over* from death to life in the resurrection, it's like escaping death, freedom from slavery, like entering promise.

Three Days. When we hear that Jesus was three days in the tomb (Mt 27:63), it's like the three days the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness before God provided life-giving water (Ex 15:22ff) and the three days they prepared before they crossed the Jordan River (Joshua 1:11).

Golgotha. When our storyteller tells us, earlier in Matthew, that Jesus was crucified at Golgotha (Mt 27:3), she says it is the place of the (round) skull, *gulgoleth*. When a round stone rolls away to reveal an empty tomb (Mt 28:5), there is a whisper of *Gilgal* (Josh 4:19) – the place the Israelites camped after *crossing over*; where they built a memorial of round stones – *galgal* – (Josh 4: 20) carried from the river; and where God said, “I have rolled away – *galal* –the disgrace of Egypt (Josh 5:9).” *Gilgal, galgal, galal, gulgoleth, Golgotha. Wheel, round, roll, skull.*

Fear and collapse. The guards who “shook” and “became as dead men” in Matthew (28:4), are like the Egyptians who “trembled” and feared that they would “all be dead” (Ex 12:33), or the Canaanites, who are overcome with “dread” and “melt in fear” (Josh 2:9).

Matthew: LIFE or Death?

Our storyteller tells us a new story, rooted in ancient stories to assure us that the good news of Jesus did not die. She is an evangelist, after all – a good new teller. In the uncertainty of faith, she offers us a choice as old as life itself: Life or death? She sets the choice before us again, and anew in a morality play with villains and a hero.



Scene One: the bad guys. It's the morning after the crucifixion. We're back in Pilate's court. Religious leaders are worried that Jesus isn't dead enough yet. Jesus said he would rise from the dead. So the priests say to him, “Pilate, sir, wouldn't it a good idea to seal the tomb and set a guard so nobody can sneak in, steal his body and claim he is alive? Could cause trouble. We need him good and dead?”

Imagine the scene: soldiers marching; heavy footsteps; clanging metal. They arrive at the tomb. The stone is in place. They seal the stone. They strike a pose, stand guard. “Nobody’s leaving this tomb on our watch!”

Shift to scene two: the good guys. Evening and morning, a third day. It’s sunrise, the beginning of a week. Quiet. Two women come “to see the tomb.” They hope that somehow the great promises of Jesus have not died on the cross. When they get there, Oh My Goodness. An angel falls out of heaven, with earthquake and lightening. The guards tremble and fall. The angel rolls aside the mighty stone, opens the tomb and sits on the stone to “preside,”⁶ over the threshold of life and death. It is as if the angel is laying it down to the guards: “I will decide who comes and goes – who lives and who dies!”

The tomb is empty. They run away, afraid but joyful.

The angel, our storyteller tells us, *crosses over* from heaven to earth to set before them LIFE or death. Blessing or curse (Dt 30:19).

It’s a simple true or false question, remember? The chief priests and Pharisees say, “true,” Jesus is dead. We sealed the tomb. We set a guard. Go about your business. Move along.

But the Marys answer, “false.” He is not dead. Christ is risen. HE IS RISEN, INDEED!

Our storyteller makes us choose. But it’s not a fair choice. She is an evangelist. She loves Jesus. She does not love the religious establishment, and she does not put them on the right side of LIFE in her story. She’s saying, **YOU** can choose to be on the side of the lying, scheming, chief priests and Pharisees, who can’t recognize love when they see it, and don’t celebrate life when it escapes the tomb right in front of them. OR, **YOU** can be like the women, who join Jesus on the LIFE-side of the tomb.

The Church is “of God,”⁷ but it is not God

We have to keep the Church in its proper perspective. It’s easy to become disoriented at General Conference. After so many days in this dazzling global community, spectacular worship, giant projection screens – it’s easy to *think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think* (Rom 12:3), and to imagine that what we do here is Gospel. But it is not. We have done the best we could, but we have inevitably “erred, and strayed...like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.”⁸

Having worked with descendants of the Sand Creek Massacre for six years, I live with a constant and sobering awareness of the capacity of the Church to choose death over LIFE, and to convince itself that it is doing the will of God when it serves up death time and again. At this General Conference what looks like life to some of us, has the stench of death to others. Our life experiences, the cultures we come from, are so very different, that what is blessed by some among us is cursed by others. We have blessings and curses fly about in this very room. We do not yet know each others’ lives well enough to recognize the fruits of the spirit in one another. So we curse what we do not understand. And as long as we are thinking the worse of one another, or protecting ourselves against the curses of others, there is no blessing and we

will not be a church that follows Jesus. We will be stuck. All of us. In an empty tomb. Or we may wander, aimlessly.

If you are a wandering soul this morning, unable to recognize this as the Church you thought you loved, wondering if there is any life left in the Church, the storyteller knows your pain, disorientation, despair. Remember that our storyteller recognized that powers and principalities (Eph 6:12 KJV), even in the Church, will sacrifice life for order. The gatekeepers of the Church will wring the life right out of Jesus if necessary. They will put the grace and mercy of Jesus 'where the sun don't shine' if they have to. They will send guards, and pass bans to keep us from learning to love one another as Christ has loved us; to keep heaven from invading the Church with life in forms they are not prepared to receive. And they will punish people who follow Jesus out of the tomb and into ministry.

If only we were certain who "they" are. "They" might be us. We might be "them." We – bishops, general agency staff, delegates – we are all subject to the same failings.

The Good News is that God is better than the Church. Our hope is in God. Can I get an "Alleluia!?"

Our storyteller wrote a story to give discouraged people hope. "There is a wideness in God's mercy,"⁹ with the power to subvert the errors we have committed and to redeem the harm we have done. God's love and grace, God's judgment and forgiveness, God's welcome and blessing are not controlled by the General Conference. So, when General Conference gets bogged down – as it does – we fly higher as Bishop Yambasu said yesterday; we turn again God in Jesus Christ, who lives, despite all odds, and who is better than Church. To confuse the wisdom and power of the Church with the wisdom and power of God is to fall victim to what Karl Barth called the "criminal arrogance of religion."¹⁰

As we turn toward home, I offer you a gospel good word and an assignment.

Hear a Good Word: God loves you, and continues to sustain you by grace.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ (Rom 8:38). This is GOSPEL, but it is not necessarily CHURCH. It is this great good news that frees slaves, fulfills promises and leads women to run from death for dear LIFE.

Your Assignment is simple

FIRST: Choose life. The way is open to you. Jesus has left the tomb. Leave the tomb quickly. Cross over to life.

This is a day of reckoning of sorts for us, as every day is.

Call to mind a moment since we have been together when you have favored death over life. We all choose death now and again. We call it sin. It is a heavy burden. A stone upon your heart. I'm not asking

you to come to the altar. But I am inviting you, as you sit in the presence of your savior, to “Lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely.”¹¹ I am inviting each one of you to find a person you have wronged and make it right TODAY, before you approach the communion table at the end of our work. Find the person during the break, maybe take their hand and bow your head humbly. Say what you need to say to recognize and honor the Christ in the other. No one needs to leave this place bearing the burden of a sin that has harmed someone, or divided the body. No one needs to live constrained by wounds from the past. No one needs to live with fear of what you do not know. If you believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality, but have never asked a gay Christian how they understand the Bible, you gotta get out of that tomb. If you believe that all African delegates are voting from somebody else’s game plan, you gotta get out of that tomb. If you think you might be stuck in a confining, life-denying tomb, during the break, find a prayer partner and bear your soul to Jesus. You are free to leave the tomb with Jesus. Leave quickly. There is no life there.

Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling. Calling for you and for me.

*Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling. Calling, oh sinner, come home.*¹²

Come home, come home, ye who are weary, come home.

Only HOME, in the household of God, is not the home we are familiar with. Home with God is strange and wonderful, and full of people we don’t know anything about.

Whatever dark and confined tomb we try to seal Jesus in, he moves on. This is the core of our faith, and yet we are stunned each time to discover that he is not here. He’s gone on. And he says again, come, follow me. I will show you wonders.

Jesus has opened the tomb. On this final day of General Conference 2016, God sets before us LIFE and death and bids us choose LIFE that we and our children may live (Dt 30:19).

FINALLY, Tell the story of LIFE: true and good.

As we return to our homes, we become storytellers. The story isn’t over once the Church has spoken. After our discernment, conferencing, and prayers, each of us is still responsible to weigh the decisions of the Church against the will of God and the resurrected Christ. Each one of us. No disciple of Jesus Christ is free to surrender conscience¹³ to the Church.¹⁴ If we cut ourselves off from our consciences, our faith will die. If we fail to speak the witness of “the Spirit. . . with your spirit (Rom 8:16),” the Church will languish and become lukewarm. Your story must be true to your experience.

But a true story is not enough. It must also be a *good* story. Tell a good, true story. No matter how you may be burdened by bad news, like the gospel storyteller, our job is to find the story of life in the midst of death. Where have you seen God at work? Where is LIFE triumphing over death? Where are wounds healed, captives set free, promises fulfilled? We have heard so much good news. Had so many good conversations, met so many good people. Take time to ask yourself, what do people need to hear? People

in your home church. Friends who don't care about church. People who live on the brink of life and death from poverty, war, displacement, illness. What good news is there from the United Methodist Church.



When I saw the UMCOM train cars and billboards all over Portland, I had a little twinge of fear. It says, "United We Help Million. What Next?" I couldn't help wondering, what if split? How will those positive, hopeful messages ring, if we leave a divided church? But we are not divided. So tell the good news. Don't deal death when you go home. Carry life! Is Christ Risen? CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED.

When the time comes, leave the tomb quickly, with fear, but great joy. Follow Jesus to Galilee, where he is back at work: walking, noticing, reading, preaching, touching, rebuking, healing, praying, explaining, eating, calling, reaching, fishing, holding, thanking, breaking, giving, sharing, feeding, shining, forgiving, entering, singing, crying, washing, breathing, blessing, dying, rising, going, sending. ALIVE!

Benediction

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,¹⁵ from whom every family¹⁶ in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

¹ Out-take from original:

Homecoming. *General Conference has brought me close to home. The cradle of my life and of much of my faith is less than 10 miles from here, north across the Columbia River in Vancouver, Washington, where I was born to Bob and Edith and baptized with my cousin, Carl, at First Methodist Church by the Rev. John Soltman in 1956. In 1976 I returned to Portland as a college senior to head a delegation to the 1976 General Conference, held just a few blocks from here. Confirmation, summer camp, college, marriage, ordination, all within a three-hour drive. My election to episcopacy occurred at the Double Tree Inn in 2008 and I was consecrated at First UMC, Portland. And now, here we are again. My faith journey has been in the Church. The Church introduced me to Jesus. I saw acts of kindness and prophetic witness through the Church. I heard my parents and grandparents and uncles and aunts struggle with the sermons. I saw people struggle through anger and depression, sorrow and confusion, civil rights, war, nuclear armament, the holocaust, disease, environmental degradation, chemical dependency, sexual identity, sexual morality, sexual abuse, all in the Church. The Church has always been the place where real people encountered, and embraced, and responded to the promises, and demands of Almighty God, the hovering presence of the Holy Spirit, and the irrepressible, death-defying resurrection of Jesus Christ. Worship has been alive and vivid for me since I memorized all the words to "Are Ye Able" before I was 8 and sang them with unbridled gusto. You are my family, for better or worse. Thank you for many blessings.*

² Gregory Palmer, United Methodist General Conference Episcopal Address, May 11, 2016.

http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/general-conference/2016/documents/GC2016-episcopal-address-FINAL.pdf

³ The Apostles' Creed.

⁴ "O, Little Town of Bethlehem," hymn by Phillips Brooks.

⁵ Hebrew, *abar* (*aw-bar*) primitive root; to cross over, used very widely of any transition

⁶ "Preside" from Latin, *prae*, 'before,' + *sedere*, 'sit'

⁷ "The Baptismal Covenant III," #49 in The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship, 1989. *The church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship and the due administration of God's Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.*

⁸ *Book of Common Prayer*, The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, 1928. "A General Confession from the Order of Morning Prayer." *ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father; We have erred,*

and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

⁹ “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy,” hymn lyrics by Frederick William Faber, 1862.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the Sixth Edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) p. 37. Barth insists on the paradoxical relationship between the Church and the Gospel: *The appointment of Jesus to be the Christ takes place in the Spirit and must be apprehended in the Spirit. . . . But the activity of the community [i.e. the Church] is related to the Gospel only in so far as it is no more than a crater formed by the explosion of a shell and seeks to be no more than a void in which the Gospel reveals itself.*

¹¹ Hebrews 12:1

¹² “Softly and Tenderly,” Cynthia Clawson

¹³ John Wesley, in “Advice to a People Called Methodist,” October 10, 1745. *Let every one enjoy the full and free liberty of thinking for himself. Let every man use his own judgment, since every man must give an account of himself to God. . . . If you cannot reason or persuade a man into the truth, never attempt to force him into it. If love will not compel him to come in, leave him to God, the Judge of all.*

¹⁴ In February, a student in the United Methodist Polity class at Iliff School of Theology asked me if candidates for ministry should answer questions from the District Committee on Ordained Ministry honestly, or if they should try to give the answer they think the Committee is looking for. I found the question chilling: how can we serve God if we have to fudge the truth with one another? There is no hope for the church if we learn early and develop a practice of presenting ourselves as we think others want or expect us to be.