

“Wake up!”

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Lawrence Park Community Church

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Matthew 28: 1-10.

Two summers ago, I spent three weeks in Rome as part of my sabbatical. I was there to study the earliest forms of Christian art. I used to be a documentary television producer and writer, so I care about what a story looks like, not just how it reads. So, I am fascinated by the ways in which the early Christians tried to visually depict the Christian story and Jesus. They faced many mysteries - what should Jesus look like if you paint him on a wall, or carve him in a sculpture? I knew from my film work that how we show something reflects what we think about the subject. In old movies, detectives only seem to work on dark and rainy nights. Comedies usually take place with all the lights on. What something looks like gives you a sense of mood, a hint of how the artist wants you to feel about a story.

The earliest art started out by showing Jesus symbolically.

Good Shepherd

He appeared as a good shepherd, but not as himself.

Philosopher

In the 4th century, around the time Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire, Jesus starts showing up as himself. He's depicted as a young philosopher, with long feminine hair, wearing a toga, surrounded by masculine-looking men. He looks kind of androgynous.

But there's one part of his story they don't show: his death. It takes a long time before Jesus is shown dead on a cross, another 500 years. Dying on a cross was a shameful, horrible death, and people just don't want to be reminded of how their Lord was killed.

And there's another gap in the early art: Jesus' resurrection. There are no images of him meeting the women outside the tomb, or on the road to Emmaus. That whole part of the story is left to the imagination, even though all Christians believed that it really happened. But in the 300s, there is one evocative image that does start showing up on caskets and in carvings. It looks like this.

Resurrection

That great big P and X is a symbol that represents Jesus, it is called a Chi Rho [ki-roh]. It is an abbreviation of the word Christos in Greek. The letters appear in a victory wreath, held by an eagle. Below, there are some sleeping guards. They had been assigned to keep watch over Jesus' tomb by the officials in Jerusalem.

Jesus had told his followers many times that he would rise from the dead after three days. The officials didn't believe Jesus would be resurrected, so they wanted to make sure the disciples did steal body out of the tomb, and then claim he was resurrected. So, they posted guards, according to Matthew's gospel.

Resurrection

So, when Christians first started showing images of the resurrection, they chose this picture. The guards sleep, as the symbol of Jesus rises above them. It isn't a literal depiction, since we don't see the dead Jesus rising out of the tomb. It's too soon for that. But it is evocative. From the Christian perspective, the guards sleep through the most important event in history, the revival of the Son of God from the dead.

In the Christian understanding, Jesus is the first, but not the last person who will be resurrected. Because of his willing death on the cross, God has granted all human beings a life after death (1 Cor 15: 20-26) . Jesus has defeated death itself.

Resurrection chi rho

That's why the chi rho [ki-roh] , his symbol, appears within a victory wreath, the kind that athletes would wear after winning a race. Jesus conquers death so all of us may be set free from a permanent death.

As often happens in art, these images are trying to get across something about the meaning of this event, rather than just showing what really happened. In today's scripture, it never says how Jesus got out of the tomb. Did he push the stone back from inside the tomb while the guards were sleeping? It doesn't say that, and the Gospel writer gives no clue how Jesus got out.

Instead, we get the story of two women arriving in the early morning, the two Marys. Unlike the other gospel stories, they don't arrive with spices in hand. They just show up. Did they expect to see Jesus emerge from the tomb on the third day after his death, as he predicted? And if they believed this, where were the male disciples? Why didn't they come to see the wonderful event? Perhaps they didn't believe Jesus. The first time Jesus mentions the resurrection to them, Peter pulls him aside and tells him to stop talking nonsense (Matthew 16:21-23) - of course he's not king to die and be resurrected. Perhaps the disciples never believed Jesus would come back from the dead, because of course, that was impossible.

But here's the thing we should notice about this story: nothing goes according to plan. The women show up - we don't know why. It is the third day. The guards are still there, they've seen nothing strange happen. Then, suddenly, an angel appears, as bright as lightning, and it rolls back the stone. Then, like a child, the angel hops on top of the stone. Does he dangle his legs? The women can see that Jesus isn't in the tomb. The guards are beyond astonished - they are scared out of their wits, frozen in place, like dead men. Nice detail that - the men who are there to make sure a dead man stays dead become like dead men themselves.

The angel tells the women Jesus isn't here, so they should go tell the men he'll meet them in Galilee. The women sound like they are surprised. Perhaps they came to see if Jesus was alive inside the tomb. But, they didn't expect to see a glowing angel or experience an earthquake. The guards are definitely surprised, no one told them this was going to happen.

And then, just when it seems like there's a plan, that Jesus will meet the men in Galilee, Jesus shows up on the road. Not to the men as promised, but to the women. And he speaks to them. His first word is often translated as "Greetings!" But the original Greek can also be translated as "Rejoice!" That sounds more like Jesus. And, to make things even more confusing, Jesus first appears to women, who in that time, were not even allowed to be witnesses in courts of law. They were considered too unreliable for that. But that doesn't stop Jesus from appearing to them first - regardless of what the angel said would happen next.

What should we make of this? It doesn't add up very well, the dots don't connect. And that, my friends, is the point. The Gospel writers know how to tell a good story, one that makes sense. We know them, the Good Samaritan story, the Prodigal son. Those stories make sense. But this one doesn't. It is full of surprises. The people who were using common sense that day were the guards. They knew what was what - dead bodies don't come back to life.

But Jesus isn't interested in common sense. His resurrection does everything possible to defy common sense. He gets out of the tomb without any explanation how. The angels says Jesus will do one thing, he does another. If we get anything out of this story, let it be that when Jesus acts, expect to be surprised. Jesus told his followers so many surprising things. In the Good Samaritan story, it was that the man who everyone else hated, the Samaritan, is the one who did the right thing and helps the injured man on the road. In the prodigal son story, it is the loser son who gambles away all his money who the father welcomes back with open arms, no questions asked. He's the one who gets the big feast. Jesus told his followers that anyone can love their friends and family, even the pagans do that, God calls on us to love our enemies, too. All of this is beyond common sense.

Jesus asks us to wake up, to go beyond common sense to make life richer, to make the world better. Society tells us that our highest calling is to simply worry about our own welfare 24/7. Jesus calls on us to wake up - life is more than belly gazing and looking out for number 1. We are all of us connected to a wondrous, marvellous universe, one God created to be marvelled at and enjoyed. To be loved, and cared for. God made every person you have ever met, and God wants us all to live flourishing lives, relieved of worry and fear.

Resurrection

There's a reason that those early Christians represented the resurrection with an image of sleeping guards. They stand for everyone who clings to the obvious, to mere common sense. They are going to sleep through life's wonders. They will try to keep life bottled up, the tomb sealed with a rock.

They did their best to kill Jesus, and they failed. Jesus embodies God's love, the love that created the universe out of nothing. The love takes mere matter and fashions birds, trees, and you - imbued with a mysterious life force that can be seen even when we are old and grey. We are so much more than common sense.

On Easter Sunday, we are asked to wake up, to be willing to be surprised. To believe that you can be light hearted again, that you can be like those women on the road laughing and crying at the same time. They woke up from a dull slumber to a life more rewarding and beautiful than those guards thought possible.

So make a choice, take a plunge - choose between being a sleeping guard and one of those women who took a risk and went to the tomb. They didn't know what they would find there - nor do you in your life. If you let go of worry and welcomed God's love of surprise, what might happen? Dare to believe that your life can be better. If you're stuck in your life, if you feel like one of the sleeping guards determined to keep life dull and predictable, then I urge you to ask for help. Pray to the one who surprised everyone, who delights in plot twists and surprise endings. This faith is led by Jesus who conquered death itself - He can help you conquer what ails you, too. Dare to believe life can be better, for yourself and others. Dare to believe that we can change the world one person at a time, starting with yourself. Dare to wake up and meet Jesus on the road. Let us dare to Rejoice.

Amen.