

(Easter) Are We Having Easter this Year? (*Matthew 28:1-10*)

A story based sermon on the theme of Easter hope

Are We Having Easter This Year? (Matthew 28:1-10)

Several years ago I read a book by a clergy woman named Barbara Brown Taylor. In the book, Barbara tells about preaching at a nursing home one Sunday afternoon. She asked the group, “What story from the Bible shall I read to you this afternoon? Things got quiet for a moment. Then an old woman’s broken voice said, “Tell us a resurrection story.” A moment of silence followed. Then another resident said, “Yes, tell us a resurrection story.” Before long, almost all of them were saying, “Tell us a resurrection story.”

The crowd at that nursing home held no illusions about themselves. They knew they were old, broken and fragile, and had little time left. So, in their great need, and in their great hope, they said, “Tell us a resurrection story.” Most of us here today are not like those people in that nursing home. Most of us are not in walkers or wheelchairs or suffering from dementia. Most of here today are fairly healthy. We have good jobs, we live in lovely homes, we drive nice cars, and we have generous 401K plans. And yet, if we are honest, we are not very different from the people in that nursing home. In many ways, we, like them, are broken and frail and confused and anxious. Like them, we need a resurrection story.

We heard a resurrection story a moment ago from our text in Matthew 28. In this story, two women go to the tomb of Jesus, and they hear the incredible news that he has risen. Then they saw Jesus and heard him say, “Do not be afraid.” Today’s text is only one of numerous resurrection stories in the Bible. Although they are all a bit different, they all end the same way—with an empty tomb, a risen Christ, and new hope for life and death. Since we all need a resurrection story, I’d like to tell you one of my favorites.

Years ago, way back in March of 1994, a young woman named Kelly Clem was serving as the pastor of Goshen United Methodist Church in Piedmont, Alabama. The Sunday before Easter, on Palm Sunday, the church was packed. Kelly's two-

year-old daughter, Sarah, was in the church nursery. Kelly's four-year-old daughter, Hannah, was dressed in a little blue and white choir robe, sitting in the front row with the children's choir. As the service got underway, the congregation heard wind blowing outside. The sky turned black. Then the lightning began, followed by hail. Then, suddenly, there was a burst of wind. The stained glass window shattered, and shards of glass shot across the sanctuary. Somebody shouted, "Tornado!" Pieces of ceiling started to fall. There was a horrible sound as the roof of the church was ripped off, and the building crashed around them. Rev. Kelly ran to check on her children. But, a brick hit her on the head, and she fell hard on her shoulder. When she finally got up, she looked around at the devastation. Someone told her that her two year old daughter, Sarah, was okay—that the nursery was still intact. Then Kelly looked down to where her four year old daughter, Hannah, had been sitting. There was nothing there but a pile of bricks. Underneath that pile of bricks, she could see little blue and white choir robes. Members of the church pulled Hannah and the other children out of the bricks, but Hannah did not make it. 19 people in the church died, and 86 others were injured. The days that followed were devastating. Kelly performed one funeral after another, including a funeral for her own daughter. Towards the end of that painful week, Kelly began to get phone calls from members of the congregation. They asked the strangest question. "Reverend Clem," they asked, "Are we having Easter this year?"

What an unusual question. "Are we having Easter this year?" Yet, when you think about it, it's really not such a strange question. Some of you today are in a toxic marriage or family situation and you are wondering, "Are we having Easter this year?" Some of you are in a brutal and oppressive work environment and you are wondering, "Are we having Easter this year?" With terrorist attacks happening daily, and mass shootings on a regular basis, and economic fear all around the globe, and poison partisan politics in this presidential season we might ask, "Are we having Easter this year?" After the death of a loved one, or the death of a marriage, or the death of a business, or the death of good health, or the death of a dream, we might ask, "Are we having Easter this year?" The early disciples could have asked that question. After seeing Jesus arrested and mocked and beaten and abandoned and crucified and laid dead in a tomb, they might have asked, "Are we having Easter this year?"

And so, members of Goshen UMC asked Kelly, “Rev. Clem, are we having Easter this year?” But Kelly knew they weren’t just asking about Sunday’s services. She knew they were saying, “Rev. Clem, we desperately need an Easter.” And, after leading 19 funerals, including the funeral of her 4 year old daughter, Kelly Clem knew that she needed an Easter also. So, Kelly and her congregation planned an Easter sunrise service. The church was destroyed, so they had the service out on the lawn, in the midst of all of the devastation of the tornado. Early on Easter morning, over 200 people gathered in the front yard of the church. There, in that dismal setting of destruction and death, Reverend Kelly Clem, with a bandage on her head, and her shoulder in a brace, made her way to the makeshift pulpit. She looked into the faces of people whose dreams and lives had been shattered. Then she read the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8, *“There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”* And with that, the Goshen UMC of Piedmont Alabama began their Easter service. They sang “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.” They prayed. They read the Easter story about how God brought life even out of death. And they recited The Apostles’ Creed, including the wonderful hope of Easter, “The third day he rose from the dead.”

It’s been many years since that sunrise Easter worship service. But that Easter hope—hope that God brings life even out of destruction and death—that resurrection hope gave the people of Goshen UMC in Piedmont Alabama the strength to rebuild their church—and the strength to rebuild their lives. And, that Easter resurrection hope gave Rev. Kelly Clem and her family the strength to rebuild their lives. In fact, the day after the tornado, a reporter asked Rev. Clem if the disaster had shattered her faith. She replied, “It has not shattered my faith. I’m holding on to my faith. It’s holding me. All of the people of Goshen are holding on to each other, along with the hope they will be able to rebuild.” Then Kelly, physically injured and full of grief over the death of her daughter, said to the reporter, “Easter is coming.”

Well, Easter came. For Kelly, and for her church. With God’s help, the good people of Goshen UMC did rebuild their church—and their lives. And, so did Kelly Clem and her family. Since the tornado, Kelly and her husband Dale have continued to live life with faith and hope, and they have continued to serve God

and God's church. Since that awful day Kelly and Dale had another child, a little girl named Laurel. And last I heard, Kelly and her family now serve in the Alabama Conference at churches in the Huntsville area. They are living a full life, and serving God faithfully.

Are we having Easter this year? You bet we are!