

Matthew 27:62-28:15
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Ellen Crawford True

The Story That Shapes Us

I love a good story, and I know I'm not alone. We who claim the south as our homeplace tend to think our people tell the best ones, but I think a love of storytelling is much older and more central to the human experience than front porches and sweet tea. Humans have been telling stories about life, love, devastation, disappointment, and hope since time began. The sacred love story between God and God's beloved children as told in scripture is one rich example. Today's text tells the story—or stories—swirling around that astounding weekend about two thousand years ago. We come to Easter expecting to hear THE story of resurrection and new life and happiness and sunshine. We've put on our Easter finest—maybe with a winter coat or rain boots—and gathered hoping to hear happy thoughts and sing happy songs, and then we read Matthew's account of Easter. His telling includes bribes and deceit and fear—not the story I want to hear at all. I want the happy ending, the simple promise, the shiny and straightforward good news. I want to hear THE story, free of complications and conspiracies. But that's not the story scripture tells.

Our passage begins on Saturday. Jesus has been crucified. The curtain in the Temple has been ripped down the middle as the ground has shaken beneath their feet, literally and figuratively. In Matthew's gospel, "the earth shook, and the rocks were split" at the time of Jesus' death. Joseph of Arimathea has placed Jesus' body in the tomb as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary watch attentively from a distance. The scene shifts to Pilate and the religious leaders who gather in fear and suspicion. They have heard Jesus' words. They know he has told all who would listen that he would rise again on the third day, and they are terrified, not that he

will be raised necessarily but that people will *think* he did. They worry that Jesus' disciples will plot and scheme and somehow get the body out of the tomb under the cover of darkness so that they can declare that Jesus has in fact risen from the dead just as he promised. They want to do everything in their power to stop that story, so they come up with one of their own.

Robyn Castellani is in the story business. She works in marketing, and she has made it her life's work to understand the power behind stories, why they capture us the way they do.

The blurb under her name on her Substack author page reads:

I believe we've got an epidemic of toxic storytelling. I believe that if we reset our narrative, we reset the world. I write about how to do that.¹

In a recent post from last week, she recalls her first major keynote address in 2016 when she kicked off a three-day symposium for high power health care executives and physicians. She insisted then and still insists that changing the narrative, changing the story can change the world:

'It's called the As-If Experience,' I say to the room filled with MDs and CEOs. 'When you watch *Jaws*, your brain reacts *as if* you are actually under threat from a shark. It lights up in all the same places, and releases all the same chemicals into your bloodstream — like a micro dose. Same with watching a sad movie, or reading a romance novel. Whatever happens in the story, happens to you.'

[She continues,] College students who read the book *Pompeii*, about fleeing from a volcano, and then had their brains scanned, showed that the book changed their brains, in ways that were visible on an MRI: the more they read about people running for their

¹ <https://substack.com/profile/7177080-robyn-castellani>

lives, the more *their own brains* bulked up in the part of the brain associated with physical activity.²

For years, her go-to mantra has been, “Change your narrative and everything changes.”

Pilate and the religious leaders are banking on this...sort of. Like the most cynical of spin doctors, they have allowed fear to get the best of them. I was reminded as I sat in this dimly lit sanctuary on Friday evening that in Matthew’s gospel, Pilate attributes the leaders’ desire to hand Jesus over to jealousy. The word has its roots in an ancient word that points to bitterness, decay, and corruption.³ The leaders are angry and frantic about the influence this out-of-hand, table-turning rabbi wields with the crowds. At their core, they fear what Jesus and his insisting that God is on the side of the meek, the grieving, the left out and left behind might mean for their tightly held, carefully orchestrated control over the life and worship of the community. Even after they see him crucified, they fear what Jesus’ followers might do, what story they might concoct. I once thought that Pilate and the leaders feared resurrection itself. I now think they are more afraid of the rumors of resurrection. Their fear prevents them from even believing for a moment that the story could be true.

In Matthew’s account, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are the first ones on the scene that first Easter morning. The last we knew of them they were sitting at a distance watching Joseph of Arimathea lay Jesus’ body in the tomb. In other accounts we are told that the women hung around until the very last moment before the sun set. I think it is safe to assume that they head home in this account, too, but I am struck by the notion that we are only

² <https://robyncastellani.substack.com/p/the-year-the-stories-failed>

³ <https://biblehub.com/greek/5355.htm>

told that they stay and stare down the tomb. The two Marys are under no delusion that they have any power to control or change the narrative. Such a notion would not even cross their minds. They have walked alongside Jesus, tended to him, fed him, listened to him, laughed with him, and even after the disciples fled in fear, they and the other women have remained steadfast through Jesus' crucifixion, watching from a distance. And now they show back up. Some get excited about the fact that they're not carrying spices to anoint the body. They want to say that the women knew there would be no body to tend. Others point out that Jesus' body had already been anointed by the woman who poured pricey perfume on him earlier in the week. I'm not sure they're absolutely convinced when they show up. Could it be that they are curious, maybe guardedly hopeful even. Jesus has been weaving the best of stories in and with them, stories that promise rest, life, peace, justice, love, and healing. He told them that he would be tried and killed. He has also said that he would be raised on the third day. Could it be that Jesus' ministry of faithfulness, mercy, righteousness, and inclusion has created new pathways in their minds and hearts? Could they come to stare down the tomb not to make up a story of their own but to see where his story goes next?

The angel shows up and the ground shakes again—the ground is always shaking in Matthew it seems. And the angel tells the women, “Do not be afraid.” While the security detail drops in terror, the women somehow find their footing. Jesus has been telling them and all who will listen to hope, to trust, to look for life, to know that Immanuel, God with us is not daunted by dead ends. Throughout his ministry, Jesus has told a story of God and God's people, reminding them who and whose they are, who and whose he is. He has given sight to beggars and invited the lame to dance. He has scandalously insisted that even the latest arrivals would

have grace doled out in abundance. He listened to children crying “Hosanna!” and confronted the powerful who pretended to hold all the cards. He has dared to suggest that even traitors, deniers, cowards, and crooks are worth giving his life for. And something within the Marys tells them that Jesus’ story is true, truer than any rumor spun by an empire built on fear and control, so they show up and stare down the tomb. Maybe Jesus’ words have sunk in in some small way, building new pathways through the Marys’ minds and bulking up muscle memory not to run from lava but to hold on to hope. So, when the angel invites them breathlessly to come and see the empty tomb and to go and tell the news of resurrection, they do. It’s not that they are suddenly fearless; it is that fear does not have the last word. They have listened to and trusted in a story that is stronger than any fear the empire can wield.

The Roman authorities and the religious leaders concoct a story out of fear and a desperate need to maintain control. One would have thought that the rumblings in Jerusalem might change their minds if not their hearts. They cannot control the power of life breaking in and through in Jesus. He was never theirs to contain, nor was the kingdom. They think they can change Jesus’ story and change the outcome, but not all stories work. Not all stories are true.

There are competing stories afoot today, as well, stories built on greed, deception, fear, and anger. There are stories that push us to be suspicious of our neighbors, stories that pit us against one another, stories that promise us everything under the sun if we only look out for ourselves. They tell us to lock down our hearts and our hopes, insisting that we must save ourselves. There is another story, of course. Jesus’ story. This story. One that tells us that life wins over death, that mercy is more powerful than might, that grace is poured out on all, that love—God’s fierce, faithful, unselfish love in Jesus Christ cannot and will not be stopped. By the

grace of God, may this be the story we trust and the story we tell again and again, until it seeps into our hearts, forges pathways through our imaginations, and flows out into our very living in God's battered and beloved world:

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.