

How Big Is Your God?
Easter Sunday 2011
Matthew 28:1-10
Pastor Vern Christopherson

As our children are growing up, one of the questions we ask them is, “How big are you?” Children often answer, “*Soooo* big!” They raise their hands to emphasize the point, as if to say, “I’m huge. I’m enormous. There’s no telling how big I might be.”

This is not a scientific answer, of course. And you wouldn’t want to use it in every situation. For instance, if your spouse were to ask, “How big do my hips look in this Easter dress?” you might not want to throw your hands up in the air and exclaim, “*Soooo* big.”

Here’s a question: *How big is your God?* Specifically, is your God big enough to help you face the deepest challenges of life?

During the season of Lent, we studied the story of Peter walking on the water. The disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee when a violent storm blows in. After battling the elements for much of the night, Jesus finally comes walking their way. At first they think it’s a ghost. They’re terrified. But Jesus assures them, “Take heart. It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

It’s amazing to me. Eleven disciples are hanging onto the side of the boat with white knuckle fear. But Peter—good old impulsive Peter—wants to get up out of the boat and go to him. Where does he get the courage? The key, I think, is in Jesus’ greeting. We translate the phrase: “It is I.” But really Jesus is using an ancient, mysterious name for God: *I AM. I AM WHO I AM*. In effect, Jesus is saying to the disciples, “*I AM* has sent me to you.” Peter is able to leave his fear behind and get out of the boat because he puts his trust in a great big God.

So how big is your God? I have a hunch that how we live our life might reflect the size of our God. If our God is big, we have the courage to take the first tentative steps out of whatever boat we’re stuck in, because we’re convinced we’re safe in the hands of an all-knowing, ever-present God. On the other hand, if our God is small, then we might have more than our share of fear and anxiety, because it feels as if everything depends on *us*.

I had pneumonia a few years back. It was during Lent. We also happened to be in the middle of a capital campaign at church. I preached on Ash Wednesday and then promptly landed flat on my back. My recovery took several weeks. During that time, I had a recurring dream in which I was juggling several balls. I was working harder and harder to try to keep all those balls up in the air. Then suddenly, it was as if someone tied my arms to my side. And all the balls fell to the ground.

Hmmm, do you suppose God was trying to tell me something? Duh! I'd been spending way too much time worrying and not nearly enough time trusting. I'd been acting as if it everything depended on me. My God was too small.

God feels pretty small sometimes, especially on Good Friday. Jesus has been a hero for his followers ever since Galilee. They've had high hopes of changing the world. Then one momentous day they come riding into Jerusalem. Oh, they try to warn Jesus. It seems like a reckless thing to do. The religious leaders are breathing fire. But Jesus is determined. He says it's part of a larger plan. Well, we know what happens. Five days later their hero is dead. Their plans get waylaid. And they are bitterly disappointed.

We live in a Friday kind of world. Sometimes our heroes disappoint us. We've heard this past week that Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*, may have stretched the truth when he told stories of building schools in Afghanistan. It could be that some of his visits to the children in remote mountain villages didn't happen exactly as he said they did. It could be that he hasn't built as many schools as he's claimed. It could be that much of the money he's raised has been used to cover his own travel and fundraising expenses. Personally I'm withholding judgment until I hear more, but you and I both know that our heroes sometimes disappoint us.

We live in a Friday kind of world. Sometimes the best laid plans get waylaid in the blink of an eye. Christie and Jason Englemann, new members at Zumbro, had a baby this past February. They named her Hannah. She's as cute as a button. Not long after Hannah was born, Christie started having headaches. They were bad enough that eventually she went to the doctor. They did a CT scan. The scan revealed a tumor in her brain. Two week ago Christie had surgery and they found an astrocytoma. The surgeon was able to remove most of it, but not all of it. Christie is now going through rehabilitation. Her speech and motor skills are returning...slowly. The other day she wrote in a journal, "I can do all things well. I can do all things well. I can do all things well." Christie's plans for being a mom are still there, but now she has to take a detour through radiation and possibly chemotherapy.

We live in a Friday kind of world. Our heroes sometimes disappoint us and our plans can get changed in the blink of an eye. When that happens—much like with the death of Jesus—we lose confidence. We feel a little less certain that we're safe in the hands of a big, strong, loving God.

But wait. There *is* more to this story. Early on Sunday morning, two women named Mary head for the cemetery. They are going to pay their respects. Suddenly there's an earthquake. An angel comes and rolls back the stone, and for good measure, the angel sits on it. The Roman guards shake like dead men. The angel says to the women, "Don't be afraid. He's been raised. Come see the place where he lay."

Matthew describes Easter as an earthquake that shakes the whole world. We can't say for sure what happens. This is what I believe: It's more than the resuscitation of a dead body. It's more than some divine spark that lives on. No, Jesus is dead and buried, and

hope is gone. But somehow God raises him up, God raises him up to a new kind of life, an Easter kind of life. Easter is about a God who is soooo big, a *God who creates a way when there is no way*.

As the women are leaving the tomb, they are filled with fear and great joy. They run to tell the others. All of a sudden they meet up with Jesus, and they fall at his feet and worship him. Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell the others that I’m going ahead of you to Galilee. I will see you there.”

Why does Jesus keep telling his followers not to be afraid? Probably because he knows us as well as he does. He knows we live in a Friday kind of world. He knows it’s hard not to be anxious and afraid when we hear stories like Greg Mortenson’s and Christie Engelmann’s. It’s hard not to be anxious and afraid with a shaky job market and volatile pension funds and rising oil prices and more trouble for our kids to get into than we could possibly imagine. It’s hard not to be anxious and afraid when we live as if everything depends on us.

Maybe we need a bigger God. Maybe we need an Easter kind of God.

Laurie Stoeger is the Intergenerational Minister here at Zumbro. Back in 1999 Laurie had some terrible pain in her lower back. She ended up having surgery. The surgeon removed a tumor that was 12 inches long and the diameter of a quarter. When Laurie woke up from surgery, she couldn’t move her right leg. After three weeks in the hospital, she was told she probably would never walk again. Laurie, however, had other ideas. She was confident God could heal her. When the doctor broke the news to Laurie, essentially telling her not to get her hopes up, she replied, “You don’t know how big my God is.” Sure enough, after a year of using a wheelchair and a walker, and two years of intense physical therapy, Laurie progressed to a quad cane and then to a regular cane.

One day Laurie came in for a follow-up visit. Her doctor, who was a self-proclaimed agnostic, examined the strength of her leg. He shook his head, crossed his arms, and sat back in his chair. He said he couldn’t believe the incredible amount of strength that had returned. “This is highly unusual,” he commented. All the while Laurie was thinking, “What he doesn’t know is that I’ve been spending a lot of time on my knees.” And then the doctor said something to Laurie that was quite remarkable, “Which church did you say you go to?”

I hear a story like this and my God gets just a little bigger. How big is our God? Big enough to impress an agnostic doctor. Big enough to help Laurie keep believing, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Of course, Laurie’s is an exceptional story of recovery. Not everyone is able to stand up and walk, despite all the prayers. But it could just be, that if our eyes are open, we might be able to see glimpses of an Easter God loose in the world. Indeed, the God who raised Jesus from the dead might be able to make a way *for us* when there is no way.

Matthew's Easter story ends in worship. That seems especially fitting. Worship enlarges our understanding of an Easter God. People, we need to worship—not only this Sunday, but next Sunday, and the Sunday after that—because without it we forget that we have a big God and instead live in fear. We need to worship because our natural tendency is to live as if everything depends on us. We need to worship because it's too easy to get stuck in our little boat and feel sorry for ourselves and stay there.

Jesus wants more for us, so much more. The Easter worship ends with a benediction: “Don't be afraid. I am going before you to Galilee.” Jesus might as well be saying: “I am going before you to Rochester, to Pine Island, to the Twin Cities. *I AM WHO I AM*. I am big enough to help when heroes disappoint and your plans get changed in the blink of an eye. I am big enough to help you recover from an astrocytoma. I am big enough to forgive those things of which you're most ashamed. I am big enough to help you handle your financial problems and your work problems and your problems at home. I am big enough to quiet your deepest fears, to heal your most bitter disappointments, to overcome your greatest struggles. I am big enough even to take those who have died into my arms and to raise them up to life with me. It comes down to this: I am big enough to make a way when there is no way.

“Take heart, Easter people, I AM WHO I AM; don't be afraid. I am going ahead of you, into the future. I will see you there.”

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.