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St. Andrew's Shippensburg

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River Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 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. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he[a] lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead,[b] and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Keep Those Rivers Flowing (Word Count =1409)

Grace, peace and forgiveness to us all from Jesus Christ, our Lord!
Amen!

Thanks to Mother Barbara for inviting me to be a part of the preaching for this *Seasons of Creation* Worship series. My name is Michael Nailor and I am a member of St. Matthew's in Sunbury. I am a Candidate for Holy Orders in the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania. This is the step before ordination into the ministry and life of a Vocational Deacon in our church. Our diocese maintains the Stevenson School for Ministry that enables people like me to discover our gifts for ministry and to listen to what God is calling us to do. I know that St. Andrew's is a supporter of the

school and diocese-wide efforts in continuing education - and for that I thank you all.

Since this is “River Sunday” I’d like to end my introduction with details of my recent adventures on the Nile, the Ganges or the Amazon. Instead, I’m afraid, it’s the Yellow Breeches, the Conodoguinet, and the Susquehanna. I am not a great river adventurer, but this week has been instructive to me as I thought back over my relationships with rivers in my life. I realized that I have never lived farther than about 5 miles from a river in all my life with most of it spent less than 10 blocks from a river. I’ve spent more time on them than in them - from the jazz cruises on The Hiawatha, a paddlewheel riverboat in Williamsport, to an ill-fated attempt to cross the I-95 bridge at Havre De Grace on foot.

The sheer volume of our river is almost unimaginable. Each day it delivers 25 billion gallons of water into the Chesapeake. However, as we are all aware, the Susquehanna is severely degraded by nitrogen and phosphorus pollution and other contaminants. Excess animal manure, agricultural runoff, improperly treated sewage discharges, and urban and suburban storm water create local water quality problems and pollute the Bay. Additionally, abandoned mine drainage, failing septic systems, vehicle exhaust, and coal fired power plant emissions, and, in some parts of the River, toxins like PCBs and mercury have severely contaminated the River’s once pristine waters. We are called this River Sunday to find ways to decrease agricultural runoff through nutrient management programs. We are called this River Sunday to

upgrade current sewage treatment facilities. We are called this River Sunday to adopt effective storm water controls. We can agree, I hope, that a healthy Susquehanna River results in a greater quality of life for the millions who call the watershed their home.

In addition to learning about specific problems with our river, I also learned a bit about the role that rivers play in Holy Scripture. From the four rivers of the Garden of Eden in Genesis to the river that flows through the City of God in Revelation - I'd suggest that we are never that far from a river in the stories of the Bible as well. My favorite river description comes from Ezekiel 47:

“Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple towards the east... Then he led me back along the bank of the river... I saw a great many trees on the one side and on the other. He said to me, ‘This water flows toward the eastern region... and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.’” This freshening, life-giving image of the river flowing east from the temple is attractive to me.

As we think about rivers together this morning perhaps we can draw some connections between them and our relationship with our Creator-God. The life-giving power of rivers that Ezekiel sketches takes me back to the source and the abundance of rivers themselves. Where exactly does all that water come from? The

actual amount may ebb and flow but as God has promised us in the reading from Genesis this morning, through a covenant, symbolized by the rainbow, that until the end of time natural cycles will continue: seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, daytime and nighttime. Just as waters bubble to the surface in springs above Cooperstown, NY to furnish a never-ending supply the Susquehanna - the grace of our God is always bubbling away for us. The volume of streams and creeks throughout the watershed add to that initial stream to form a truly great river.

This summer as I worked as a chaplain intern in Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia I was overwhelmed by incredible abundance of God's love that is available for everyone - to be a healing power and a comfort in times of loss. Yet I was also saddened that so many people cut themselves off from that love - or worse yet are unaware of God's love. I have a hard time imagining anyone going through the lowest points in their lives without access to the love of God. Often in the hospital I would be frustrated by the fact that there is such an abundance available for people but through guilt or shame, folks had closed themselves off from the flow of God's love. It's a little like paving over the spring of the river with a parking lot. You know how that will end. Flowing water - given long enough - is persistent and will clear out all blockages in its way. As we might feel called to clear a section of streambed of debris to improve our physical environment, can we do the same for our fellow human beings? Can we help to clear away some of the

garbage that gets in the way of other people who need the gift of life that God's love - fully understood, fully realized - can give?

Just as the river in Ezekiel flows from the Temple and the river in Revelation flows from the throne of God - our Gospel today points us to one of the greatest symbols of God's love flowing into the world - the empty tomb. Imagine a spiritual river flowing out of the empty tomb filling the whole world. And the first folks to put their toes in that river are Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. Thank God for the faithfulness of these women. They went, as Matthew says, to see the tomb, to investigate. Where were the men? Fled to Galilee. And what did the angel tell these two faithful Apostles to do? They were to go tell the others that Jesus was raised and "indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him." Jesus is **going ahead** of them **into** the world - not **going away** from the world. Like a mighty river rising from a very small source, Jesus's presence and his love is still spreading from that source - the empty tomb - to fill our entire world. That is the picture that Matthew in his last chapter wants to leave us with. There is no ascension story at the end of Matthew's gospel. The book ends with our great commissioning to "make disciples of all nations." Get busy working **in** the world to make others aware of the love of God! And the final sentence of the Gospel is a final reminder as the love of God flows out to include all people: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Just like the promise in Genesis that cycles would follow on cycles, just as the promise of the river that it would always flow, Jesus is

promising to be with us - not remote in some far-off throne room in heaven - but to be as near to us as that river. Surrounding us in God's love, bringing life to everything that Jesus touches.

We humans are drawn to rivers. Over 50% of the world's population lives closer than 2 miles to a river, and only 10% of the population lives further than 6 miles away from one. We have an obligation, a covenant with future generations to keep them clean, refreshing and attractive. As God keeps the covenant with us to keep our rivers flowing, may we recognize added urgency to keep our physical and spiritual rivers flowing in our lives for others both today and in the future.