

Matthew 28:1-10

¹After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

²There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

⁸So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The message delivered by the angels is clear, succinct, and compelling: "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised." This message -- "do not be afraid" -- is in many ways the hallmark of good news. Announced throughout Scripture by angels and messengers at key moments of tension and drama in the biblical story, it always heralds the restorative and empowering word of courage that is the very essence of the gospel.

At the same time, however, Matthew also paints what is perhaps the most alarming and, quite frankly, awe-inspiring (if not downright fear-inducing!) picture of the resurrection of the four gospel accounts. First, there is the earthquake that comes as something of an echo to the quake that erupted when Jesus died (27:51). Next, note that the stone has not yet been moved from the entrance of the tomb when the women arrive on scene. Rather, an angel of the Lord descends and rolls back the stone. Moreover, the angel's appearance isn't just striking -- with a face like lightning and clothing so white that you could hardly see the creature that was speaking-- but is actually terrifying. Hence the guards at the tomb immediately faint in terror.

No wonder these women are afraid. And no wonder the angel therefore first speaks words of comfort and courage. "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised." Of course, it doesn't stop there, after the fear, and after the words of courage, comes a command: "Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

And they do. They come and see and then run and tell. And Matthew describes their obedience as a mixture of “fear and joy.”

I wonder if that isn't also our reality. As I lay in the hospital bed the first week of March, sicker than I had ever been before, with the doctors saying they had no idea what was happening to me, I wondered what had happened to me and what my future was going to be. At the end of the second week, I knew that I had a very dangerous blood infection and was facing 23 days of three per day intravenous treatments. I had been supported by daily visits from family and friends, and the knowledge that probably hundreds of church members and friends were lifting me up in daily prayers. Now I would be going directly to Spiritrust on Old Harrisburg Road, and due to the Corona-virus pandemic, I would have no visitors at all.

These past weeks, we all understand in a new way that 'ordinary' life is tinged by both fear and joy. Fear of what may happen to our children in a dangerous world; joy at the blessing they are to us and, we pray, they will be to the world. Fear of how we will pay the bills in the year to come; joy at the colleagues that surround us. Fear about the future amid problems both national and global; joy in the present moment surrounded by those we love. Or to come a bit closer to home, fear about the future of our congregations/parish; joy in our call to proclaim the gospel.

I think it's striking that the announcement of resurrection doesn't take away all their fear. Rather, it enables them to keep faith amid their fears, to do their duty and share their good news in spite of their anxiety. This is the very definition of courage. And, courage is precisely what Easter is about. For while some preach that coming to faith in Christ should smooth all the rough places of life and still the tremors of this world, I believe that the gospel gives us the ability to keep our feet amid the tremors and enables us not just to persevere but even to flourish when life is difficult.

“Do not be afraid.” This charge -- repeated by Jesus when he encounters the women -- gives us insight into the very nature of our lives in this world. For there is, indeed, much to fear in our mortal lives. And yet the resurrection of Christ creates the possibility for joy and hope and courage and so much more. Why? Because it changes everything. In the resurrection, you see, we have God's promise that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient -- real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality.

Fear and joy, despair and hope, doubt and faith, these are the two sides of our lives in this world. But in the end, we have heard the resurrection promise that joy, hope, and faith will ultimately prevail. It's a powerful message for us and for the world!

When I think of the promise of Easter courage in the face of daily fears, I am regularly reminded of the funeral service of Winston Churchill. (I first heard about it from Pastor David Lose, a Lutheran pastor and seminary president.) At the close of the service that Churchill planned

himself, a single trumpeter stood at the west end of St. Paul's Abby and sounded "Taps," the song that signals dusk and the close of another day and is frequently played at the end of a military funeral. But after a moment of stillness that followed the last plaintive note of that song, another trumpeter stood at the east end of St. Paul's, the end that faced the rising sun, and played "Reveille," the song of the morning and the call to a new day.

Churchill perceived, you see, that Christ's resurrection signals above and beyond all else that our God is a God of new life and never-ending possibility. The good news of Christ's resurrection does not take away our fear -- though sometimes we wish desperately that it would -- but it does offer us courage and hope by anchoring us in the sure promise that God will have the last word, and that that word is one of light and life and grace and mercy and love and peace.

Our role is no less significant than the divine messenger of all those years ago. For the fearsome and joyous news still has the capacity to create life and faith in those who hear it today. And we are all privileged to live and share it with those around us!

Have a Blessed Easter (and look forward to the day when we will be able to celebrate it together back in our beloved places of worship!)

Pastor Clark

PS thank you to Kay Bupp for her Sunday messages, and to many others who have stepped up in unheralded ways in this difficult time. Thank you also for the visits (when that was possible), dozens of texts, voice messages, cards, and countless prayers that were sent to the throne of God on my behalf. I really missed our times together and look forward to getting back in touch with you all.