

The Resurrection and Fear Matt. 28:1-10 4/4/21

It's interesting to me that Easter doesn't get nearly the attention that Christmas does- even in the church! There are few Easter parties, very little decorating, people don't exchange gifts, family rituals are much more limited, no one sings Easter carols, and there's no comparison between the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus! It's strange because the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the central, defining moment of Christian faith! The Apostle Paul himself said that if Jesus didn't rise from the grave, our faith is in vain, we are still stuck in our sins, and we should be pitied above all other people! (I Cor. 15:17-19) There are lots of reasons why that's true, but let's focus on just one of them this morning. Listen to the resurrection story as found in Matthew's gospel, and pay attention to the issue of fear.

*After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup>For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>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.”<sup>8</sup> So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.<sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” (Matt. 28:1-10)*

The women, who had watched as Jesus died a horrible death and had seen him placed in the grave, came to visit the tomb on Sunday morning. As they arrived, they were literally jolted by an earthquake, a sign of cosmic activity. And then they saw the angel, sitting on the stone he had rolled away from the tomb entrance. It was a terrifying sight, and the guards fainted! But the angel assured the women that there was nothing to fear, and told them the good news that Jesus had been raised from the dead. The angel then sends them on their way to tell the other disciples the good news. On the way, they encounter Jesus himself, who also tells them to not be afraid, but to go ahead and tell the others. And that’s exactly what they do!

Fear is an interesting sub-theme in these ten verses; it is mentioned four times! Now the women and the other disciples were already living with a gripping fear, because the chief priests and the Roman government had just demonstrated their ruthless power by putting Jesus to death. Would

his followers be next? Maybe. Because of their fear, the disciples were in hiding!

We know something about fear, too. Of course, there is Covid 19, which has caused the death of people known to us, and seriously affected the health of others. And some of us are facing other serious illnesses and are afraid we may not survive. The pandemic has also put a great deal of strain on some of our marriages and we are afraid they may not survive. Some of you have lost your jobs. Others fear that they may lose theirs. And, we fear the future of our church. Will people come back again? What will church look like in the future? Yes, we know about fear! But how do we cope with it?

Abigail Marsh is a professor of neuroscience and psychology at Georgetown University and the author of a book about fear. In an op ed piece in the Washington Post last year, she talked about how fear has shaped our responses to the coronavirus. Some people coped with their fear of the disease by denying it. They minimized its threat or blamed the media for overreacting to it. Marsh says that this is not an effective response to real threats of any kind. Jesus would agree! He told his followers about how the powers of evil would oppose and kill him, warning them that they would also encounter persecution for following him. He didn't deny the threat or downplay it at all. He faced it honestly, and

encouraged his followers to do the same. As Pope Francis recently remarked, “The world is seriously ill... and not just with the coronavirus.” There are real threats in the world at large and right here in Gettysburg and we shouldn’t deny them.

A second coping strategy, according to Dr. Marsh, is to manage the threat. To look for trusted, reliable sources of good information and respond wisely. I think that advice is good, as far as it goes. But will it work with Covid 19, a threat that is very deadly, taking over 500,000 American lives in the past year? Can we manage ourselves out of our fear of death itself? Is that even possible? Obtaining and responding to reliable information will only get you so far. I truly believe that we need spiritual resources to face the reality of our mortality. The resurrection offers some help here. You see, the New Testament teaches that Jesus’ resurrection is a sign that our own resurrection is sure to come- that death will not have the final word for any of us, but that like Jesus, we will be raised to new life. That gives us hope to hang onto as we face death.

Finally, Dr. Marsh says we need to marshal courage, to put on our big boy pants to face and master our fears, instead of letting them drive our actions and our feelings. As John Wayne once said, “Courage is being scared to death...and saddling up anyway!” We see an example of that in the Holy Week story, where Jesus is anxious in the extreme in the garden

of Gethsemane, but ultimately entrusts himself to God's care, in spite of knowing what is ahead. Jesus was determined to do God's will, to do the loving thing for humanity in spite of his fears. That is courage. And his story can change our fearful hearts if we allow it to.

Those of you who have taken part in our Lenten small groups will have heard this story from Presbyterian pastor, Ben Patterson. Years ago there was a missionary who brought the story of Jesus to the people of a remote Asian tribe for the first time. He did it by setting up a movie projector and generator and showing them the "Jesus" film. They had never seen a movie before, and had never heard the story of Jesus, so it was a very powerful experience for them. As the film played, they watched this good man, Jesus, tell stories, heal the sick, and bless the children. Then he was arrested and beaten without cause by the soldiers, and jeered by the crowds. As they watched this, they became very agitated! They stood up to shout at the cruel men on the screen, demanding that this outrage stop.

When nothing happened, they attacked the missionary running the projector, who stopped the film, and explained that the story wasn't over yet, that there was more. So the people settled down, waiting to see what would happen. Well, what happened was the crucifixion! People began to weep and wail in loud grief, so that the projector had to be stopped once

more. The missionary again explained that there was more to the story, so the people again sat down to see how it would end.

Of course, the resurrection came next! Pandemonium broke out and the gathering spontaneously broke into a party! The noise was now joyful jubilation with people dancing and slapping each other on the back. The missionary again shut off the projector, but this time he didn't have to tell them to wait for what would happen next. All that was supposed to happen- in the story and in their lives- was already happening as they celebrated the good news of Christ's victory over sin and death and fear. It's an event that still reverberates in our lives today. And that's what we're celebrating this morning!

Sin and death and fear have been defeated, although they are still a reality in our fallen world. We believe that they will be completely defeated by the Risen Christ, who walks with us in the meantime, assuring, comforting, and encouraging us. So let's celebrate that Good News on this Easter day.