

Matthew 28:1-10

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

Living God, with joy we celebrate the presence of your risen Word. Enliven our hearts by your Holy Spirit so that we may proclaim the good news of eternal and abundant life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We shout he is Risen! And the response should be, "He is risen indeed!" I'm not sure how much of a response I'd get today, at least a response that I could hear. It's not quite the same when everyone is at home watching on a screen. Not only that, but despite our celebration of the greatest miracle to ever happen, we are sitting in difficult times. There is a lot of fear out there, and a lot of anger as well. Fear and anger tend to go hand in hand after all. Many times, we are fearful and then because of that fear we get angry. And sometimes that anger is directed in ways and at others that it shouldn't be.

I think it's important to note that our Easter story this morning, in fact if you think about it, our whole gospel story, is one where we are told to not be afraid. I generally do not like mixing my gospels up, because I think the authors of each one has a specific way of telling their story, to a specific audience, with a specific message, but if you look at Luke's account of Jesus's birth, and then you look at Matthew's account of the resurrection you will see one similarity. They both say, "Do not be afraid."

In Luke the angel Gabriel says it to Mary, along with the news that she will be the mother of the Messiah. The angel also says it to the shepherds watching their flocks that blessed night.

In Matthew an angel comes to roll the stone from the tomb and says the same thing to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. It happens a second time when the Mary's meet up with Jesus on the way to tell the other disciples, this time spoken by Jesus himself.

Honestly there was a lot to be afraid of in that Matthew text. The Mary's are going to see Jesus, which is an interesting twist on things compared to other gospels. Mark had the women coming to rub spices and other ritualistic burial traditions, but Matthew never mentions that. These two women have taken it upon themselves to go "see" Jesus. They must have had a huge amount of faith in Jesus's announcement that he would be raised in three days. I say this because they were the only ones who came to the tomb, none of the other named disciples joined them. Not only that, but they came to a tomb that was guarded by Temple guards and had a large stone rolled in front of it; a stone that, in theory, they would not have been strong enough to roll away.

When they arrive at the tomb an earthquake happens. I'm not sure how many of you have been in an earthquake. I'd ask for a show of hands, but that's not going to help me much. We don't have them in this part of the country, at least I've never felt one here. I have been in an

earthquake though. When my family took our vacation about four years ago to San Francisco we had one that was around a four on the Richter scale. At the time it was morning in our 14th floor hotel room. Specifically, I was in the shower at the time when it happened. Imagine being in a slippery tub and feeling the whole building sway back and forth! It was a unique experience I am not really keen on experiencing again! We all had a little fear and a lot of uncertainty. Where we supposed to try to get out of the building, or go to the main floor? Should we take the elevator or try to go down the stairs? Luckily, it didn't happen a second time, so we decided to just continue getting ready.

The guards at the tomb certainly felt fear when the angel came and opened the tomb. Our text says they were so afraid they just stood in place. For all we know they may have gone into physical shock at the sight of the angel, and honestly, can you blame them?

Do not be afraid; when was the last time anyone said something like that to you, and they did it with authority? In other words, when was the last time someone said something like that to you and you believed it?

One commentator pointed out that it was probably a long time ago. In fact it could have been back in your childhood. He says. "When I was a child my mother or my father held me close, blotted my tears, stroked my hair, and said, "you do not need to be afraid. There is nothing to be afraid of," I would believe it. It came as a great comfort-but that seems like a long time ago."

As we become adults our fears become more complex and words of assurance seem harder to come by. Maybe it's because we realize that the situation may not get better, or that the quick fixes of childhood are not so readily available. The problems that we face are much bigger than a scraped knee that a lollipop or ice cream can distract us from. As adults we face the realization that life is not fair and that as we get older time and death start to claim the things we know and love. In this realization it can be hard to find words of reassurance.

Another problem we have is that we become suspicious of reassurance that is given to us. Who is this person, and do they really know what they're talking about? Are they saying everything's going to be fine when it's not? One commentator gave an example of a pilot that announces to the plane that they are experiencing an unusual amount of turbulence, but there is no reason to be worried. You may not have been worried about it, but now that he has mentioned it, should you be?

Here is the thing; scripture, the angels, and Jesus Christ all tell us to not be afraid, and they all have the authority to back that statement. It reminds me of the musical *Come from Away*. It is a musical story of the small town of Gander Newfoundland and the planeloads of people they took in after the 9/11 attacks. Many of the travelers were from all over the world and the folks from Gander didn't speak their language.

One bus driver was taking a load of people who had come from Africa to house them at a Salvation Army summer camp. It was the middle of the night and the people were very scared, and he was trying to think of a way to reassure them. He noticed one of the women holding a Bible, so he asked for it and turned to Philippians 4:6 which starts with, "Do not worry about anything,..." It was a starting point for them in communication.

As one commentator puts it, "When the angel says, "Do not be afraid," or when Jesus says. "Fear not," it is not assurance that nothing can go wrong, because often things do go wrong. It is not assurance that everything turns out for the best, because if we are honest about it, it seldom does. Rather, it is assurance that, whatever may happen to us, whatever a day may hold, God has the power to strengthen us and uphold us; that whatever we must face, we do not

face it alone; that nothing we encounter is stronger than God's love; that ultimately God gets the last word; that in the end-and sometimes even before the end-God's love is triumphant. Only God can offer such assurance, and that is why, in the end, only God, or one of God's messengers. Can say. "Do not be afraid." And say it with authority."

Let's face it, it's not the words that are said, it is who is saying them. As an example; Soren Kierkegaard pointed this out when observing that when a theological student says "There is eternal life," and when God's own son says," There is eternal life," They are using the exact same words, and both are true, but only one of them has authority.

As I mentioned before; we are in a time where fear is prevalent. To my knowledge there has not been anyone in this congregation who has gotten the virus that is attacking all of humanity. Many of us might not even know family or friends that have gotten it. But it's like a big hammer hanging over our heads. It could happen at any time, and it could be fatal.

The message of the resurrection is that we do not have to fear. Death has lost its sting. We know in the end, no matter how things turn out for us here, Through the grace and love of God, we have the great joy and honor to be with welcomed in God's heavenly kingdom. And that message comes to us from the top, the utmost authority. Happy Easter, Amen.