

sermon-3/23/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“A New Day Dawning”
Matt. 28:1-10

Reading Matthew’s version of the Easter story this year I was struck with just how much irony there is in his telling of the story. At times it is even humorous. I realize we are not accustomed to seeing humor in our most sacred Biblical stories, but take another look at this passage.

The women come to the tomb and are confronted with an earthquake big enough to roll away the stone covering the entrance. Not only is the earth shaking, but they are confronted with an angel descending from heaven who looked like lightening with clothes as white as snow. These things are so frightening the big, burly Roman guards faint. They become like dead men.

Surely Matthew is smiling when he writes this. The one supposed to be dead, Jesus, the one seemingly defenseless against Rome’s mighty power to crucify, is not dead. And those who seem to have all the power are on the ground like dead men.

And then the first words the angel says to the women are, “Do not be afraid.” It just boggles the mind. If the earthquake and the angel make soldiers drop like dead men, you would think the women would be frightened out of their minds. Surely they would run away. But, no, they remain.

And then they turn around and the risen Christ pops up out of nowhere with the simple word, “Greetings!” If the women aren’t shaken by this point, they must be now. And the next words out of the mouth of Jesus echo the angel’s first words, “Do not be afraid.”

It strikes me as humorous in its own way. And yet, at the same time, it strikes me as incredibly serious and important. The first words of the resurrection are critical. They set the framework for understanding the new reality this event ushered into history. The first words are, “Do not be afraid.” Somehow the mystery of this event can be unlocked by those words. Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid of death. See, death does not have the final word in Jesus’ life. It will not have the final word in our lives as well. Do not let the fear of death alter the way you live your life. Don’t cling to life so tenaciously that you are afraid to take any chances. Don’t always choose to play it safe. Don’t always try to avoid danger at all costs.

Of course our final death is not all that makes us afraid. We have fears about our health. Cancer seems to be everywhere. Almost anything that taste good is bad for us. If it doesn’t cause cancer, it will lead to heart trouble.

We have economic fears. Especially with all the grim news about banks in trouble, sub-prime loans causing a huge mess, these economic fears can feel justified. Is my job safe? What will happen if we go into another Depression?

We are afraid our children will make mistakes that will cause them pain. There is no way to keep them safe short of locking them up until they become adults, but we wish we could keep them from harm.

This list of what can trigger fear in us is almost endless. We are afraid of terrorists sneaking into our country to do us harm. Some are afraid of making a mistake. Others are afraid of trying something new.

I would call all of these other fears a function of the larger fear of death. We are afraid of all that feels out of our control. We are afraid of all that can disrupt our lives, cause us pain, or ruin the image we have of the successful life, the good life to which we all feel entitled.

When we make decisions based on our fears, or when we are feeling especially fearful, we make very poor decisions indeed. When economic fears strike, many become stingy. When fear of terrorists is palpable, we condone things like torture and abuse of civil liberties that do not come from the best places in us. When we fear the future, we don't live freely in the present.

The message of the resurrection is "Do Not Be Afraid!" To live a resurrected life while we walk on this earth is to come to terms with our fears. It is to not let those fears determine our choices or how we live. How do we know if someone believes in the resurrection? Look at how they deal with their fears.

I can point to many in the congregations I have served, including this one, who have faced their own death without fear. I know of people who have overcome their fears and gone on mission trips that are out of their comfort zone. I know people who have spoken out in public on some issue of justice risking ridicule and angry responses. Some have given away more money than they ever thought possible because they made that decision out of love and hope, not fears about scarcity or what might come. All those are examples of people living out, fleshing out, as it were, the resurrection.

To live out of the resurrection requires a paradigm shift. It is to begin to look at the world and our lives from a very different perspective, a perspective that affirms that death is not all powerful. God will triumph over evil. Love will defeat hate. We can change. Old dogs can learn new tricks.

I think that is part of what this story of the first Easter is all about. Matthew writes, "as the first day of the week was dawning.. ." That first Easter was the beginning of a new age, a new day. The old age and the old way of thinking was crumbling. It was not working anymore.

It is not surprising that Matthew writes of an earthquake greeting the dawning of this new age. The disciples' worldview, their old way of making sense of their lives, was shaken to its core. Resurrection hope replaced fear and hopeless despair. That requires an earthshaking change of perspective.

How did this happen? I don't think we will ever understand what really happened that first Easter. The empty tomb is no proof of the resurrection. Matthew points out, right after our passage, that the priests and elders paid the guards to circulate a story that the disciples came and stole the body from the tomb. Claiming an empty tomb proves nothing. Paul, the first historical witness to the resurrection, never even mentions the empty tomb as he tries to convince others of the truth of the resurrection.

Even seeing the risen Christ is not enough. Matthew, later on in chapter 28, says this when the disciples go to Galilee to meet the risen Christ, "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." (28:17) Even seeing is not believing. That ought to make us who have never seen the risen Christ feel a little better. Even if we could travel back in time and actually see what the disciples saw, there is no guarantee we would believe or have all our questions answered.

What does that leave us who live 2,000 years later? We have the written witness of those first disciples. And, we have our own experience of resurrection hope. We experience glimpses of the resurrection right in the midst of our days, our routines, our interactions with each other. That is part of what I think the angel's message to go back to Galilee is all about.

Galilee was home for many of the disciples. It was where they worked, where their families and friends lived. They are told to go back to their lives in Galilee and they would experience the resurrected one. This is because, as the angel said, the risen Christ was going ahead of them into Galilee.

The resurrected Christ is always going on ahead. We can't outrun the resurrection. God, in Christ, is present everywhere and anywhere we can go. The very last words of the gospel of Matthew are, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." God's presence surrounds us, inhabits us at our core. We live and move and have our being in that presence. Therefore, we do not need to be afraid.

What makes you afraid or anxious? What is preventing you from living freely, living the exuberant life God, in Christ, promises us? Easter urges us to face our fears and begin to let them go.

It is a process. It happens one little baby step at a time. Look at the women at the empty tomb. Matthew writes, "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy. . ." That makes me smile and gives me hope. They were the first witnesses to this new day dawning and they still had fear. But, they also were experiencing great joy. Maturing in the Christian life is all about slowly replacing our fears with joy. By the end of our lives, wouldn't it be great if others would say, "See how joyful they are!?" Happy Easter.
Amen