

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“Do Not Be Afraid” (Matthew 28:1-10)
Easter Sunday: April 12, 2020
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia! Although we are not together physically we join millions around the world in celebrating the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who identified himself as the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25) and demonstrated that once and for all on Easter morning. As we just heard from the Gospel According to Matthew when “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” (“the other Mary” was most likely the mother of James and Joseph) arrived at Jesus’ tomb at dawn they were stunned by “a great earthquake” and an angel whose “appearance was like lightening” descended from the sky, rolled back the stone, and sat on it (Matthew 28:1-4). The two Mary’s were terrified (I certainly would be) for this same angel then told them:

Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. 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 to you (Matthew 28:5-7).

The two Mary’s were filled with both “fear and great joy” and immediately started running to tell the disciples what the angel had told them (Matthew 28:8). And yet, as if that were not enough, something even more magnificent than what they had just experienced happened:

Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me (Matthew 28:9-10).

Jesus told the two Mary’s the same thing the angel had, “Do not be afraid.” That is the message of Easter, “Do not be afraid.” God’s love is stronger than death. No matter what happens, the resurrection of Jesus means you have nothing to fear.

Earlier Matthew had written that on Good Friday these same two Mary's, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, had watched Jesus suffer and die on the cross "from a distance" (Matthew 27:55). From a distance they had watched Jesus struggle and gasp for every breath. From a distance they had seen the darkness come over the whole land for three hours. From a distance they had heard Jesus' cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). And from a distance after Jesus' final breath, they heard those who stood near the cross proclaim, "Truly this man was God's son!" (Matthew 26:54). And from a distance on Easter morning these same two Mary's saw the angel roll away the stone from the tomb, an empty tomb because Jesus had indeed risen from the dead just as he said he would.

But then the very last thing they would have ever expected to happen that morning actually did happen, as they were met by the Risen Jesus himself—and this did not happen at a distance, but up close and personal, so much so that as they worshipped their Risen Lord they "took hold of his feet." They no longer saw Jesus at a distance, because the Risen Jesus was right there with them, assuring them as the angel had, "Do not be afraid."

As a priest I have often had the privilege of visiting with people on their deathbed, either just prior to, during, or just after their death. These visits are sacred. Of the many, many of these visits however one stands alone as the most humbling. I was standing next to the deathbed of an elderly man who had just died. His family and I were gathered together there in the hospital room to say some prayers. But in the middle of the prayers something really strange happened—suddenly the hospital bed upon which the dead man was lying slowly began to rise up, and we were all stunned. This dead man was suddenly rising up—what was going on? Then to my great shock and even greater embarrassment I realized I had accidentally leaned against the button for raising the bed. So we were all gathered around this wonderful saint for prayers in that sacred moment, and I'm pushing the button to raise the bed, like some really sick and twisted practical joke. In that moment I felt like the most clueless priest on the planet...oops. It was so awkward, to say the least, but the man's family could not have been more gracious and we all started chucking softly and the chuckling turned into a good laugh. Yet when it comes to the dead being raised, I am by no means the only clueless person out there. Even as we celebrate this Easter many of us are still clueless about the resurrection.

Like Jesus' death on Good Friday, Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday is a cosmic, immeasurable, universal expression of God's love for the world, and God's love for you. Again, God's love for you is stronger than death. Scripture assures us, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). The resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us hope even in the face of death because God's love casts out fear, so that even on death's doorstep we need not be afraid. Regardless of how clueless we are about Jesus' resurrection or about our own resurrection, we can still laugh because we can still remember the words of the angel and the words of Jesus on Easter morning: "Do not be afraid."

One of Shakespeare's later tragedies is his masterpiece *King Lear*. As you may remember King Lear was very old and losing his mind. He has three daughters, the older two, Goneril and Regan, fawn over him because they want his land and power, and he gives them what they want. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, receives nothing from her father because she refused to fawn over her him for she was more interested in him than his land and power. Later King Lear is disrespected by the older two daughters to whom he had given everything, and as he realizes that Cordelia was actually the one daughter who truly loved him this accelerates his mental descent into madness. As is so often the case in Shakespeare's tragedies, many of the main characters die. This happened with all three of King Lear's daughters, lastly Cordelia, who had always been his favorite.

Then in a scene literary critic Harold Bloom calls "the shattering beyond all measure, in Shakespeare and indeed all Western literature" Lear walks onstage carrying the body of his beloved youngest daughter Cordelia, and he cries out:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack: she's gone forever.
I know when one is dead and when one lives;
She's dead as earth (V.iii.255-259).

Harold Bloom continues, "That fourfold 'Howl' is the cry of the human in Lear, and an injunction to all of us to shout out our grief" (*Lear: The Great Image of Authority* 155). Death is the most heartbreaking part of our existence. When our loved ones are "dead as earth" we cry and we howl and we shout out our grief.

But on Easter we remember that yes, while death is the most heartbreaking part of our existence, the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the accompanying hope of our resurrection is the most heart-healing part of our existence. Jesus' resurrection replaces our cries of grief with cries of joy. Jesus' resurrection replaces our howls of grief with howls of laughter. Jesus' resurrection replaces our shouts of grief with shouts of joy. This is what happened when the two Mary's who were still in the midst of their grief saw the empty tomb and saw the Risen Jesus and knew that it was all going to be alright after all, and were reminded, "Do not be afraid." Jesus' resurrection replaces death with life—and changes everything.

In his book *Abba's Child* (1994) by the late great preacher Brennan Manning there is a story about an elderly man who was dying of cancer and who had always struggled with prayer. Prayer just never "clicked" for him...until he heeded the advice of a friend who told him, "Sit down on a chair and place an empty chair in front of you and in faith see Jesus on the chair...Then just speak to Him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now." This dying man had begun doing just that. It worked so well he started talking with Jesus in prayer several hours a day. He was careful never to do so in front of his daughter, his caregiver who loved him like Cordelia loved Lear, out of fear she would think he was crazy, but he did share all this with a priest. Brennan Manning concludes this true story:

The priest was deeply moved...Then he prayed with him, anointed him with oil, and returned to the rectory. Two nights later the daughter called to tell the priest that her daddy had died that afternoon. "Did he seem to die in peace?" he asked. "Yes," the daughter replied, "when I left the house around two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange, in fact, beyond strange, kinda weird. Apparently just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed (125).

And that is what it looks like to take to heart the message of Easter. God's love is stronger than death. The words of the angel and the Risen Jesus to the two Mary's on Easter morning are God's words to you this Easter Day, "Do not be afraid."

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia! Amen.