

DO NOT BE AFRAID

(or, "Can You Look Death in the Face?")

Matthew 28:1-20

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Oakland Avenue PCUSA

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MATTHEW 28:1-20 (NRSV)

- 1 *After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.*
- 2 *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.*
- 3 *His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.*
- 4 *For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.*
- 5 *But the angel said to the women, "**Do not be afraid**; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.*
- 6 *He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.*
- 7 *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."*
- 8 *So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*
- 9 *Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.*
- 10 *Then Jesus said to them, "**Do not be afraid**; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*
- 11 *While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened.*
- 12 *After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers,*
- 13 *telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'*
- 14 *If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."*
- 15 *So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.*
- 16 *Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.*
- 17 *When they saw him, they worshiped him; and some doubted.*
- 18 *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*
- 19 *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*
- 20 *and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

You have not come here this morning to hear about Easter bunnies or colored eggs or pretty clothes. That is NOT what Easter is about.

As your Interim Pastor, if I could tell you only one thing on this Easter Sunday morning, it would be this:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AFRAID!

One of the great things about being a Presbyterian Minister is that over the years I have often been honored by members and friends to be present during the dying of a loved one. I remember very clearly the first time that I was present at the death of a person; at the time, I was a Chaplain at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta. I remember it feeling to be an unreal experience, and I was embarrassed that I did not know exactly how I was supposed to feel.

When my mother died in 2004, I was present with her in her room when she died. It was an easy death; it was not a belabored death; it was an easy death. She had been unconscious for a day or so, and then she simply stopped breathing.

Back in 1927, American novelist Willa Cather wrote a novel about the great southwestern part of our United States in which her chief character was Roman Catholic Archbishop *Jean Marie LaTour*. In his retirement, rather than returning to his native France, the Archbishop chooses to remain outside Sante Fe, New Mexico, where he dies. It is recorded, “**After nearly forty years of love and service, the archbishop died ‘of having lived.’**” [Cather, Willa, Death Comes for the Archbishop, New York Vintage Books, (1927, renewed, 1955), from the outside back cover of the book.]

You could say that about the death of my 96 year old mother: *she died ‘of having lived.’*

Our families gathered around us and by their presence told us:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AFRAID.

The Pastors of the Gainesville Presbyterian church led in worship and by doing so said:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AFRAID.

Our friends came and took us in their arms and hearts, and by their hugs told us:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AFRAID.

The Church fulfilled its centuries-old mission as it loved us and told us:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AFRAID.

Sally and I had had our faith in God from our birth and from our baptism. Over the years it had quietly become stronger and stronger, and at my mother’s death, the last living parent of both of us, our personal faith in God rose up and told us:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AFRAID.

As your Interim Pastor, if I could tell you only one thing on this Easter Sunday Morning here in Rock Hill, South Carolina, it would be this:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AFRAID.

THE UNKNOWN

We are afraid of anything which is unknown to us.

That is why sometimes when I come into this dark church building at night by myself I have an uneasy feeling. I am afraid that someone unknown to me in the dark is going to hit me on the head! That is one of the reasons in the Book of Genesis that Jacob was afraid when he wrestled in the dark night with the Stranger and Jacob had his name changed to Israel: it was dark and the Stranger was unknown to Jacob!

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Corinth, puts things in perspective for us concerning THE UNKNOWN when he comments:

“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”
(I Corinthians 15:26)

Of all the many things that people fear, perhaps the greatest fear involves DEATH.

DEATH is THE BIG UNKNOWN.

Now, having said that, there are at least two things which we need to remember concerning the resurrection stories about Jesus.

FIRST, according to the Bible, **GOD RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD**. Jesus did not raise himself! The New Testament does not speak of the resurrection as the result of an inner divine power within Jesus which somehow survived death and enabled Jesus to live again. Jesus was really dead.....totally dead. That is what the Apostles' Creed is trying to say when we repeat: "...he descended into hell..." He went to the place of the dead.

In his book Christian Doctrine, the late Professor Shirley Guthrie wrote:

***“The resurrection is the story of God’s giving life to a dead man,
not of the immortality this man possessed in himself.”***

(Guthrie, Shirley, Christian Doctrine (Revised Edition).
Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, p. 274)

First, according to the Bible, God raised Jesus from the dead.

SECOND, we need to remember the emphasis that the New Testament places on **the physical, worldly reality of the risen Jesus**.

It is true that there was a mysterious difference between the Jesus whom the disciples had known before the crucifixion and the Jesus whom the disciples knew after the resurrection. But the gospel writers go out of their way to emphasize that **the risen Jesus** is the same Jesus whom they had known before. Jesus walks,

Jesus talks,
Jesus eats, and
Jesus can be touched.

The risen Jesus is not a ghost or phantom! (Guthrie)

So, what does all of this have to say to us here in Rock Hill in 2008 on Easter Sunday?

It says that when we begin to speak about **the meaning of the resurrection**, we must not **spiritualize** it.....so that it has only an other-worldly significance for the next life. The resurrection happened in **THIS** world. For Jesus himself, it meant **NOT** escaping from his own humanity and the human existence of other people. Rather, it meant the **RENEWAL** of his own humanity and the **RENEWAL** of our own humanity:

...hurting, crying, loving, caring.

DOES THAT MAKE SENSE TO YOU?

In other words, the resurrection does not have to do only with the significance of Jesus for us after we die and leave this world as we know it. The resurrection has to do also with the lives of flesh-and-blood men and women right here and right now! The resurrection has to do with the **UNKNOWN**S that each of us faces and with which we wrestle every day.

SO, if you leave worship today and return to a family situation where there is distrust and suspicion and lack of love, remember that the Jesus who tells us **“Do not be afraid”** is the same Jesus who promises us:

“Lo, I am with you always.”

If you leave worship today and return to your situation of job uncertainty or vocational change or occupational doubts, remember that the Jesus who tells us **“Do not be afraid”** is the same Jesus who promises us:

“Lo, I am with you always.”

If you leave worship today and return to your situation of loneliness and lovelessness and guilt, remember that the Jesus who tells us **“Do not be afraid”** is the same Jesus who promises us:

“Lo, I am with you always.”

If you leave worship today and must walk through the valley of the shadow of death, remember that the Jesus who tells us **“Do not be afraid”** is the same Jesus who promises us:

“Lo, I am with you always.”

Some of you will remember when my teacher and friend and colleague Shirley Guthrie died three years ago. He had taught theology at Columbia Seminary for years. Some of you have

probably studied his book Christian Doctrine. Near the end of his life, Shirley was losing his battle against cancer, and he had come to the point when his appetite had left him and he tired easily, but he still enjoyed short visits from friends and colleagues and students.

One such visitor was one of his closest friends, Charles B. Cousar, Professor of New Testament at Columbia Seminary. Charlie and Shirley had both begun teaching at about the same time and for over 40 years together in the classrooms they had influenced the lives of people and the life of the church. They certainly influenced me!

Dr. Cousar reported at Guthrie's funeral that during that visit, Shirley had said to him, "Cousar, do you remember during our years of teaching together there were times when doubts about The Faith would grab hold of me?" Charlie Cousar said that Guthrie stared intently at him and then his face broke into his famous grin when he said:

"It's all true!"

Jesus said: **"I am the resurrection and the life. Everyone who believes in me, though they die, yet shall they live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."**
(John 11:25; NRSV)