

Do Not Be Afraid

The Rev. Andrew Van Kirk

April 16, 2017 (Easter, Year A [Matthew 28:1-10])

St. Andrew's Westridge

Happy Easter friends! It is good to celebrate the feast of our Lord's Resurrection with you this morning!

My sister Sarah has already celebrated her Easter morning. She is likely well on her way to Easter nap, for she lives in London, England. We heard from her last week, and she was complaining about the difficulty she was having finding an Easter card to send to our kids. Sarah is always great about sending little notes to the kids — postcards from Oslo or Bucharest, birthday cards, and also holiday notes. But she was having a hard time with an Easter card. All the cards she could find said, "Happy Chocolate Day!" Seriously.

I regret to inform you, friends, this is not Chocolate Day.

The English actually have been butchering the name of this holiday for — well, basically for as long as they've been Christian. The word Easter, while sharing the same root as the directional word "east," actually comes from the name of a fertility goddess, Eastre, who was associated with spring time. This is strange, and not something other European languages do when referring to this holiday. Naming the chief Christian holiday after a pagan goddess is bad enough that it actually makes one wonder whether "Chocolate Day" wouldn't be something of an improvement.

In any case, we're obviously not here to celebrate chocolate or germanic fertility goddesses. We're here to celebrate the Resurrection. Once, I was preaching a Children's Sermon on Easter at a previous church. I asked the assembled gaggle of kids what today was about. And this one little girl, about four, shot up, threw both her hands in the air, and shouted out, "Jesus rise-ed!" I wanted to mic-drop for her. The rest of that children's sermon was thoroughly anti-climactic. As, I suppose, is the case for every sermon on the far side of the gospel reading of Jesus' resurrection. I, uh, can't improve on this.

And yet I wonder about the state in which we receive this news; if we're in a place where it touch us deeply. Look at y'all — sharply dressed, looking good, smiling — maybe you've got brunch reservations, or Easter dinner plans somewhere. You older kids may be designing your tactical strategies for maximum Easter egg collection after worship. We're doing alright this morning — at least on the outside.

Which is the exact opposite of how Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were doing when they went to the tomb. They were not doing alright. They had followed Jesus' body to the tomb on Friday evening; they had watched as the great stone was rolled in front. Then they had gone home and rested on the sabbath, as the Lord had commanded. On the first day of the week, on Sunday, they got up and went to the tomb at dawn — Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. They were not ok; they were not looking ahead to Easter dinner. Their life was upside down.

Then, there was an earthquake, an angel bright as lightening and clothed in pure white came and rolled back the stone in front of the tomb. The guards shook and fainted — becoming like dead men. (I love this detail: In this sense, Jesus' new birth into a resurrected body was much like normal childbirth. It's the guys, who aren't doing anything but standing there to begin with, that do the fainting. The women are just like "Ugh! Come on!" and then are left to face this situation on their own.) To them the angel says, in verse 5, "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 the angel told them to tell the other disciples and to tell them to go to Galilee where they would meet Jesus.

Scripture tells us that they go quickly, with "fear and great joy." So joy, but also fear. The fear is still there. And then, suddenly, Jesus meets them. They hug on him. They worship him. And then he tells them too, "Do not be afraid."

"Do not be afraid" is the most common command in the Bible. But the Easter "Do not be afraid," the "Do not be afraid" imparted to the women first by the angel and then by Jesus, is God's greatest "Do not be afraid." Easter is God's meeting our greatest, deepest fears and saying, "Do not be afraid."

If the first thing out of the angel's mouth, and then out of Jesus' mouth on that glorious day was "Do not be afraid," then the women must have been afraid, right? Certainly, the whole situation is very surprising, and an encounter with the very holy. So that's part of it...but there's even more going on here.

Easter is not making what is sweet, like a cupcake, even sweeter, like a cupcake with chocolate frosting. Easter is not taking something good, like a peanut butter egg, and making it better, by covering it in chocolate and calling it a Reese's Egg. Easter is not Chocolate Day. Easter is not God making an improvement on something good. Easter is not a great excuse for brunch. Easter is God taking what is dark, scary and horrible and blasting it apart. In their Easter "Do not be afraid," God addresses our deepest fears. And one of those is fears is the fear of God.

The women had some legitimate reason to imagine that if he really was resurrected, the Son of God might be coming back hoppin' mad at all sorts of people.

He could have been mad at the disciples. Even though the women — had stayed with Jesus until the end, through his final breath on the cross and his being laid in the tomb, the disciples as a whole had not. They had deserted Jesus, left him alone, and, at least in Peter's case, outright denied him. When the going got tough, the disciples got going — the other way!

Jesus also could have been mad at the guards at the tomb, presumably from the same detachment of soldiers that did the spitting and mocking and scourging and crucifying. It would be reasonable to expect Jesus to have a "chat" with them on the way out the door. That earthquake could have been a divine, "Let's get ready to rumble!"

But at his resurrection, Jesus doesn't do anything of the sort. We rarely consider how marvelous it is that the resurrected Jesus doesn't settle any scores — with the guards, with his unfaithful band of followers, or with anyone else.

Listen, friends, the Son of God did not rise from the dead so that God could get even with you. It's all too easy, and I know because I've done it, to get stuck in your faith because you became afraid that you've done something that God just can't get past. That is not the way the Easter story reads...do not be afraid!

In fact, the first thing Jesus does with the disciples is he schedules a meeting about what comes next. Maybe you're like these disciples; maybe you've spent some time having deserted Christ — well, he'd like to schedule some time with you to talk about what comes next. Do not be afraid the Lord has a furious tongue lashing in store for you; the Lord has a future in store for you.

There's a man in our congregation who was only driven back into church when his alcoholism drove his wife out of their marriage. But coming back to church wasn't enough; his life kept falling apart — job, apartment, kids. And he was afraid. He only got his life turned around when, in a small group, he realized that the risen Jesus wanted him to have a future with God, not a fear of God. His fear of God had been keeping him from a future with God.

Jesus took care of your past with the cross on Good Friday; the Resurrection on Easter is Jesus taking care of your future. So do not be afraid — of God.

Second, those women on Easter morning had to be at least a little bit afraid of death. Being a devoted follower of Jesus — the guy who just got executed — was not safe to begin with. Nor was showing up in front of armed guards as soon as visiting hours at the tomb started. Mary and Mary were taking a risk. For them, death could come soon, in the form of being killed. It was only natural for them to fear death.

The divine words spoken to their fear on Easter morning are, “Do not be afraid.” “Do not be afraid,” not because death won’t come, but “do not be afraid” because Jesus is alive.

I want to be real clear about something. Today we are not celebrating that Jesus brought us the hope of eternal life. The Jews of Jesus’ day — some of them at least — already hoped for eternal life; the Pharisees believed there would be a resurrection. Jesus did not bring some new fangled idea.

No, Jesus did not bring the hope of immortality, he brought its proof. 2 Timothy 1:10 says this: “Our Savior Christ Jesus...abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Jesus didn’t just tell us about the resurrection, he showed us what it’s like in his own person.

There’s a biblical story about a bird. It’s a dove, and it was on the ark with Noah that time God cleansed the world from evil and remade it. That was the first living thing to leave the ark and find dry land. And when that dove found dry land — an infinite improvement over that ark — that dove didn’t stop and build and nest and enjoy its new home. That dove came back, with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its mouth. It came back with proof.

Jesus is like that dove; the forerunner of our faith, as scripture calls him. The one who goes first from death to resurrected life in heaven, but not before coming back to show us proof.

For us, thankfully, Easter morning presents no risk to our lives like it presented those first women. But we can still, and many of us do, fear death. We don’t fear the armed guards, we fear what the hulking CT scanner will show, we fear vague pain we’re trying to describe to the doctor, the sudden stroke, the car accident, we fear the heart attack and the terrorist attack. Maybe you fear death abstractly, as something that will happen someday; or maybe you fear it concretely, as something that is happening. And we live out of that fear. I don’t mean that we don’t go skydiving. I mean that we curtail our dreams, we choose paychecks over passion; we stress about our lives instead of serving the lives of others. In too many ways, dying shapes our living — it’s supposed to be the other way around.

Imagine what you could do if you didn’t fear death. Do not be afraid.

At the core of following Jesus is this idea that the way to God is to follow him through death. Not to death, but through it. That’s what “you must take up his cross and follow me...” means. The following doesn’t end with death. Follow him all the way to Easter. The Lord is risen; he’s showed us what it’s like on the other side.

On Easter morning, the women are the very first to hear God's "do not be afraid." Today, I want you to hear it too. Do not be afraid of God — the resurrection is God coming back to get you. And do not be afraid of death — it will happen to us, but Jesus has brought the resurrected life into the light of day, so we can be not afraid.

Because of this do not be afraid, Easter as is much about the present as the future. Because when you're not afraid of God and you're not afraid of death, the present changes. Doors of forgiveness and reconciliation are opened. The traps of self-doubt and self-loathing are disarmed. You can find your calling, and with God as your partner instead of your adversary, you can do amazing things you haven't even dreamed of yet. Easter can make your forever eternal; but it can also make your now new. Do not be afraid, my brothers and sisters. He has been raised. Alleluia.