

Sermon for Sunday, April 16, 2017

DO NOT BE AFRAID

I don't know about you, but as a young person, graveyards gave me the creeps. I'd seen too many horror movies involving cemeteries to want to spend any time in them, much less any time at night! I interviewed for a church job when I was leaving seminary, whose manse was separated from the church by a graveyard, and the thought of having to walk through that graveyard in the dark, night after night, all by myself to get home, was terrifying. Thankfully, I wasn't called to that church!

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, before the crack of dawn—while it was still dark—went to the graveyard where Jesus was laid to rest. They wanted to be near him a little while longer. It was hard to believe he was gone. Less than a week ago he had been hailed as the Messiah. Seeing the grave would help them absorb the fact that he was really dead.

Normally the quiet of the early morning has a peaceful effect on the soul, but not so much in a graveyard. There the silence is too profound, too lifeless, as it carries in it our anxiety about our own inevitable end. So with this anxiety of the soul, and their grief over the death of Jesus wrenching at their hearts, the two Marys approached the tomb of Jesus. I'm glad I wasn't with them.

Then there was an earthquake! An earthquake! Anyone who has been in one knows how utterly unnerving it is to have the ground beneath your feet shake. You feel completely helpless, at the mercy of a power way beyond your control, and unable to find any stable place. It is a terrifying experience. But terror reaches new dimensions when you experience an earthquake in a graveyard! And then to add a little Stephen King horror to the experience, the earthquake rolled away the stone and opened up the tomb. Gosh, I'm glad I wasn't with them!

Then, if that wasn't enough, an angel of the Lord appeared. Though we like to think of angels as nice, friendly, heavenly-looking creatures, the biblical witness doesn't support that. Angels were frightening apparitions who usually scared people half to death, and this angel was no exception. Its appearance was like lightening, and for fear of him—not to mention the earthquake and the opening of the grave—the guards became like dead men, terrified to the bone, unable to move. God knows the women were terrified too. Then the angel, who looked like lightening, perched himself on top of the stone as if it were a throne and said, "Do not be afraid."

Really! I doubt those words did much to allay the fear of the women, and scripture supports that it didn't. After the angel's announcement, they left quickly from the tomb with fear. Fear! But by then it was fear mingled with great joy, because a sense of hope had been restored in them, a hope grounded in the proclamation that the son of God was no longer dead, but had risen from the grave.

When they ran into Jesus himself, risen from the dead, they were terrified again, and who wouldn't be? His first words were the same as the angel's: "Do not be afraid." But Jesus was talking to them about a different fear, a more pervasive fear. He was declaring that fear need no longer rule their lives, because he was risen. That fear, which gnaws at each of our souls, is the fear of being human, of being finite, of knowing that we too will die. To that fear Jesus speaks a word of hope, which is a fresh today as it was on that first terrifying Easter morning.

There is a lot to be afraid of in this day and age: Cancer, Alzheimer's, crime, terrorist attacks, gun violence, and North Korea, just to name a few, even earthquakes, floods, and tornadoes. But all our fears boil down to one abiding fear, which is the fear of death. It's the fear of not being, the fear that life, despite what we do and accomplish is meaningless, and the fear that judgement awaits us, that we will be

condemned somehow for having failed to live well, and right, and as fully as God intended us to live.¹ Easter addresses all these fears with good news.

First, is the fear that we won't be, or what Paul Tillich called, the fear of not being. Death implies a complete loss of self. That which we were, which we became, thought, and felt is no longer. But Easter denies that. The resurrection of Jesus affirms that we are each eternally important to our Creator, that who we are, who we have become, what we have loved and how we have loved, what we have contributed to the welfare of humankind, and how we have stewarded God's gifts, is not merely remembered by the living, but is preserved for eternity in communion with God's life. Rather than living in hopelessness, we can live with courage, knowing that our names, and our bodies, and our histories are in God's Book of Life. We need not live afraid.

Second, is the fear that life is meaningless, that God is but a figment of our imagination, and that all our striving after the good, and our sacrifices for the good, and our selflessness and sharing, our faithful dedication to the other and to God, is all just silliness, an utter waste of our time on earth. But Easter denies that. Though the Cross tries to declare that life and faith are meaningless, the Resurrection declares that it is not. God's will and purpose for life will prevail, despite anything humankind does to thwart it, and the resurrection of Jesus recasts everything he said, everything he did, and everything he promised into eternal truth. Life, and death, are meaningful because they are of God, and God lives. Do not be afraid!

Third, is the fear that if life is eternal, and meaningful, and that everything we do and say has everlasting significance to God, that we will be found unworthy, judged in the presence of God's perfect love, as having failed at life. Somehow we sense that we are responsible for ourselves, and responsible for what we do with the gift of life, and for who we become, and what we accomplish. When we know we aren't living up to our full potential, and failing to be and become the best that we can be, we feel guilty, and guilt can make us hopeless and despairing. But Easter denies guilt and judgement. The Resurrection assures us that God forgives us, that God loves us, and that God abides with us, no matter what. The first and lasting proclamation of Easter, is that Jesus bore on our sins in his body on the cross that we might die to sin, and live to righteousness, that his suffering and sacrifice, atoned for us, broke the power of death to frighten us, and opened the gates to everlasting communion with God. Do not be afraid! In Jesus Christ we are forgiven, and we are loved!

The two Marys left the graveyard that morning with both fear and great joy. They witnessed something that would have scared the socks off the most courageous of us. But they also heard a message of profound and eternal encouragement. The Son of God is not dead, but lives, and Jesus promised that because he lives, we shall live also. Hope is not dashed but is restored. All that threatens to undo is defeated. We can live courageously and confidently in faith, knowing that God is with us. He who was victorious is at our side, and on our side, until the close of the age. "Do not be afraid," said Jesus. "Nothing can keep you from your destination in God's house as long as I am with you, and you with me."

There was a little girl, whose way home from school led through a graveyard. Asked if she was afraid she answered, "No, I just cross it to reach home." Jesus has made a path for us through the graveyard. Do not be afraid. You just have to cross it to reach home.

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Matthew 28:1-10
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¹ Tillich, Paul, *The Courage to Be*, (Yale University Press, New Haven & London), 1952, p. 41.