

Afraid, Yet Filled with Joy
Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Sunrise

In our church this year, many people have received bad news:

It's cancer.

It's ALS.

It's broken

Your treatment is not working anymore.

There is nothing more we can do.

And in the midst of all that, we have had 9 deaths in the weeks surrounding Easter.

We are here this morning because Easter speaks to these circumstances. The message begins with these words from our scripture passage:

Do not be afraid.

Fear is mentioned four times in our short scripture passage today.

Do you have a fear?

One of the fears I hear the most from people, especially in a retirement community, is the process of dying. Not death itself, but the process. When I sit at the bedside of someone dying, I hear: I am ready to go. I am not afraid of death, but I'm afraid of the process. The word for fear of death or dying is thanatophobia.

We are not alone in that fear. Jesus feared the process of death as he prayed in the Garden before his arrest. He was so stressed that the Gospel of John records that Jesus sweat drops like blood. Jesus asks His Father is there any other way? Please take this cup away from me.

There are a lot of different fears in this passage. We hear this story so much that we forget how terrifying it was. We sing about the joy of Easter, but first we need to name the fear. The fear of scary situations is phobophobia

The women approached the tomb of Jesus while there was still darkness. The fear of the dark is called nyctophobia.

The women and the guards experience a violent earthquake. The fear of earthquakes is called seismophobia.

Then comes the angel. Now this is an angel who knows how to make an entrance. He comes with a flourish from heaven, bright as lightening and clothes as white as snow. I love this part: he rolls back the large, sealed stone and sits on it. This is an angel with attitude.

The passage says the guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The fear of angels is called angelophobia. The angel didn't care if these guards were afraid or not. He doesn't tell *them* not to be afraid. His message is reserved for the two women.

Why the women? On Maundy Thursday, we ended the worship service with these words: "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." However, it was the women who stayed. They followed Jesus to the hill where he was crucified. They watched from a distance as Jesus died (Matthew 27:56). They watched as Jesus was laid in the tomb (Matthew 27:61). And of course, they were the first ones to the tomb after the Sabbath. As a result, they had the honor of being the first witnesses to the Resurrection.

I know who you are looking for, the angel says. Look in the tomb, the cave. Jesus is not there. The fear of closed spaces is claustrophobia.

Do not be afraid, the angel says. Scholars say that "do not fear" or "do not be afraid" is the most repeated command in the Bible. It is the hardest one to live up to. It is repeated at least 365 times because our Creator knows us so well.

We are going to admit this morning that we will always have something to fear. Most of our fears are grounded in uncertainty of the future. Some do not get on a plane because they fear it will crash, which by the way, is called aerophobia. I am fearful of retirement because I don't know if I will have enough money. The fear of financial difficulties is called chrometophobia.

But Easter gives us a way to move forward, even in the midst of the fear.

The angel says to the women, “He is risen, just as he said.” Just as he said. Over and over in the gospel story, Jesus tries to tell his disciples that the Son of Man will suffer and be killed, but will be raised. Over and over again, the disciples heard those first words but they forgot about the last part...the victory part. He will be raised again.

When we face our fears, it is so easy to forget that second part, the victory part, the risen part. But we are told do not be afraid. He is risen, so there is hope and victory waiting out there for us. Just as he said.

The angel continued, “He is risen from the dead and is going ahead of you....”

Too often, we see Easter as a conclusion, but the resurrection of Jesus is only the beginning. Easter, the promise of the resurrection, is not simply what God has done, but what God is still doing. Tomorrow, Easter is not over, it is on-going.

The promise of the angel is that Jesus always goes ahead of us. We do not need to fear the future, because Jesus is in it. He is calling us forward and promising to meet us in what lies ahead. The resurrection makes it possible to experience joy among crippling fear. Did you notice that as the women left the tomb with the astonishing news that Jesus was not there, they were still afraid yet they were filled with joy.

Fear and joy. They often go together.

And let’s be clear. Jesus goes before us not just in fearful things, but in the ordinary day to day life things, too. A friend of mine was having her house remodeled, and it was getting frustrating. Everything was a mess, dirty, dusty, noisy as the power saws were doing their job.

Suddenly, all the noise stopped for a few moments. She heard a bird singing, and in the cadence of the bird song, she heard the bird saying, “God is here, here, here. God is here, here, here.”

“God is here? Even in in this mess?” she exclaimed.

“God is here, here, here,” the bird sang.

The Risen Christ goes before us into all the incomplete, unfinished, confused and fearful parts of our lives. He meets us in the ordinary, mundane, everyday places where we live and work, laugh and cry, suffer and rejoice, succeed and fail. Jesus is not a memory, but a presence. He goes before you. Just as he said. And we can find joy in the fear.

God is here, here, here.

So, back to the nine deaths we have experienced in our congregation this Easter: Arleen Boyuls, Margaret Moore, Juanita Anderson, Doris Steffy, Mark Horton, Dave Tompkins, Norm Tenbrink, David Rude, Delores Lindgren. At one point, Pastor Craig and I exclaimed as we heard of one more death: “No, no more!” And I said at one point, “God, we don’t need any more examples of the Resurrection!”

Our humanness and fear and grief react.

Yet, at each memorial, we can proclaim, as you have been hearing over and over these past few weeks, and you will it again next week, twice: “Jesus Christ said, ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life.’ Therefore, because Christ lives, so shall we – now and in the life to come. Because Christ lives, Christ is alive and present with us today. This is what we celebrate.”

Do not be afraid, my friends. He is risen just as he said, and he goes before you. Therefore, we can be filled with joy because God is here, here, here.

Having hear these words, let us proclaim together our Easter faith by saying the Easter Affirmation of Faith in your bulletin.....

This is the good news which we received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day; and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve, and to many faithful witnesses. We believe he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end. He is our Lord and our God.