

April 9, 2023
“As Though Dead”
Matthew 28:1-10 / John 20:1-18
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Rumor or wishful thinking has it – as I have shared at Calvary before, and as you may have seen or heard otherwise – that variations of the phrase, “Do not be afraid” or “fear not” appear in the Bible 365 times.

A quick internet search confirms a bit of surrounding controversy, and the more likely conclusion that they do not. But it’s actually a beautiful and comforting notion to think that the Bible provides, in effect, a verse a day to keep the fear away, to keep the fear at bay, so the fear can’t play – but, of course, it doesn’t matter.

It doesn’t matter how many times because, the fact is, it comes up a lot! It is inarguably a biblical point of emphasis regardless, no more poignantly and powerfully than through the events of Holy Week that have brought us through the long wilderness of Lent, through Holy Week and the suffering of Jesus’ denial and betrayal and arrest and ridicule and crucifixion, and now to the impossible good news of Resurrection and the promise of liberation and new life.

To be clear, phrases like “do not be afraid” or “fear not” are better understood as appeals to proceed with courage in the face of fear, in spite of fear, rather than somehow live without fear altogether.

The Australian cartoonist, philosopher and poet, Michael Leunig, writes:

There are only two feelings.
Love and fear.
There are only two languages.
Love and fear.
There are only two activities.
Love and fear.
There are only two motives,
two procedures, two frameworks,
two results.
Love and fear.
Love and fear.

We get different accounts of the Resurrection story this morning, as Grace just read for us, but it strikes me that love and fear are really what Matthew's talking about. This is what's at stake in the story.

Love and fear – and here, rightly understanding fear, rather than HATRED, as the opposite of love. As in 1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears,” which, to be clear, would be all of us, “has not reached perfection in love.” Which, I'm sure we can all agree, would also be all of us.

John Wesley, the inadvertent founder of Methodism, famously said that we should be “moving onto perfection” – by which he meant, perfect love. Needless to say, we're not there yet – as Good Friday then and Good Fridays still make all too painfully clear.

It is fear, of course, that's at the heart of the Crucifixion – and at the heart of crucifixions ongoing, as we lamented together last week: climate change, racism, sexism and misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, poverty and income inequality, nativism and xenophobia, war and violence.

On and on, brokenness we have created, driven by fear and its byproducts: hatred, indifference, self-centeredness, violence.

As Episcopal Bishop Robert O'Neill writes, “Any way you cut it, the story of Jesus' crucifixion is dominated by fear, and most ironically, all the characters who would otherwise consider themselves to be separated by position or power or class or religion or politics or race or tribe unwittingly find themselves bound together as one. It is a unity of fear – everyone dancing together to the same deadly tune in a conspiracy that in the end accomplishes only one objective – to kill and destroy the very love that is the source of all life.”

Jesus embraces and embodies such love in the face of death, even torturous death, and yet fear appears – for a time – to have the final word on the cross.

The good news of Easter Resurrection, of the empty tomb, is that it doesn't. Love does. Love and life power on.

The Resurrection is not about resuscitation, it's about transformation. Divine love transforming human fear. Love nurturing life and enabling life made new EVEN when and where fear has bred nothing but brokenness and death.

As Steve Garnaas-Holmes writes, "Resurrection isn't the same as 'bouncing back.' There's no 'back' to it. It's about being plunged forward, into a new life that's not just more of the old one. Resurrection is more like an unexpected beginning than a happy ending. God miraculously creates life where there was none—and no potential—before. Resurrection is not the same as near-death. It's actual death. Failure. Surrender. It's out of our brokenness that resurrection comes. Resurrection is not 'return;' it's transformation. Resurrection is the transformation that happens when we surrender to love. When we give our lives in love God gives us new ones."

Within the Easter narrative, Sister Joan Chittister invokes what she calls the "sacrament of transformation." As she writes, "'The tomb was empty,' the Scriptures said later, metaphorically perhaps but pointedly, nevertheless. People had known (Jesus') presence again, not the same as before the crucifixion, true, but real, nevertheless. Transformed. Somehow or other Jesus had defeated death, had snatched new life from its cavernous throat. The implications were overwhelming. ... life itself could never be the same again. Jesus, transformed, leads us to look beyond the obvious, to allow for the presence of God in alien places in unanticipated ways. Resurrection begs the scrutiny of the obvious, the celebration of the sacrament of transformation."

I love that! Resurrection begs the scrutiny of the obvious, the celebration of the sacrament of transformation.

Matthew's gospel, like John and the rest, sets the stage for that transformation, a new beginning – noting that the Resurrection takes place after "the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning." Still dark, but with light on the horizon.

And we rightly note, as all four gospel accounts make very clear, that it is the women who gather. The faithful and no-doubt fearful women disciples, the no-doubt fearful and YET STILL faithful women disciples, who gathered around the cross when the male disciples ran for cover, and now gather around the tomb. Looking suffering and death straight in the eyes.

And so it is the women who keep vigil at the edge of divine possibility. It is the women who bear witness, who ultimately tell the story and share the good news.

As the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann famously pointed out, "Without women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the Resurrection." Amen?!

In Matthew's account, the women no sooner arrive at the tomb than a great earthquake marks the arrival of a messenger from God, an angel. With appearance like lightning and clothing like snow. Altogether dazzling and dramatic, as with Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. And yes, frightening. Understandably so.

But hear the difference. Hear the difference in the fear – between the Roman guards, assigned by Pilate to ENSURE death, and the women disciples, inspired by Jesus to PURSUE life. No matter what.

"For fear of the messenger," begins verse 4, "the guards shook and were as though dead." As though dead. As though dead! The guards are overcome by their fear. And when that's the case, fear equals death. When we are that afraid, there is no room for anything else.

The same divine messenger tells the women NOT to fear, confirming the good news that Jesus has been raised, TRANSFORMED. And then pointing them to Galilee to see him with their own eyes, though they already believe without seeing.

Leaving the tomb and the as-though-dead guards behind, the women do so "with fear and great joy." Fear AND great joy.

Again, hear the difference. The women are afraid – of course they're afraid! But they are not overcome by their fear. They proceed – still in the dark, still carrying their own

brokenness, still traumatized by the brokenness they have witnessed – with courage and even great joy in the face of their fear. In spite of it.

Driven by faith and so liberated from the weight of fear, they make space within themselves for hope and love to take root – and with them, joy. They are not as though dead; like Jesus himself, they are very much alive.

Some of you may have noticed the “Words to Live and Love By” quote in this week’s Calvary Connections, from Richard Rohr: “The cross is the standing statement of what we do to one another and to ourselves. The resurrection is the standing statement of what God does to us in return.”

The cross, the Crucifixion, confirms the world at its shadowed worst; the human capacity for unspeakable cruelty when fear, when FEAR, drives the bus.

Fear equals death.

The empty tomb, the Resurrection, affirms God at God’s luminous best; in fact, IN God’s luminous essence. The divine mandate for unconditional mercy and compassion where love and LOVE alone drives the bus. Because God is Love itself and can only be Love.

Love equals life. Love is liberation from the shackles of fear and death.

If you’ve watched the show, *Ted Lasso*, you’re familiar with the character, Dani Rojas, one of the players on the fictional AFC Richmond football team. And by football, of course, I mean soccer.

And if you’ve watched the show, you’re also familiar with Dani’s catch phrase, “Football is life!” – which he repeats with child-like joy every chance he gets.

As Easter people, friends, we are reminded again that love is life! Love is life!

In both the life and death of Jesus we are given a profound glimpse into the relentless, transforming, life-altering power of divine love. And now with the Resurrection, we get a profound glimpse into just how far divine love will go.

And to be sure, Resurrection – like Crucifixion – is ongoing.

As Bishop O'Neill further suggests, "This is resurrection – our awakening to, and our coming to consciousness of, the depth and power of love – for there is no place, no crack, no crevice, no dark nook, in all of this life, where the unfathomable, unconditional, unconquerable love that God does not reach, and there is no place in which we are not already in the love that is God."

Not even death can stop it. Fear is death. Love is life.

Meister Eckhart, the 14th-century German priest and mystic, wrote a couple of brief poem-prayers that well capture that truth. The first goes like this:

*Often I wish my enemies and
those who try to hurt me an
equal harm, like to like—as
anger meets anger and hate
meets hate—but You keep
reminding me, early and late,
that love is unlike meeting like.*

And the second:

*O fall with me all the long
way down, and so reach
me through the call that
rises impossibly as
the upward gravity
of love*

Love is "unlike meeting like." Love is Easter meeting Good Friday. Fall as we might and do, O God, reach us through the call that rises impossibly as the upward gravity of love!

That probably would've been a better sermon title, "The Upward Gravity of Love!" Fear forces DOWN to hell; love rises UP to heaven.

Easter, as God's dramatic response to the horror of Good Friday and Good Fridays ongoing, reminds us that love is life. Life liberated. Life made new, transformed, resurrected. And Easter reminds us that we are called to be people of the Resurrection. Of resurrection. Transformation.

The great pastor, campus minister, theologian and activist, William Sloane Coffin, once wrote that "What makes Easter so exciting is the cosmic quality of it. For Easter has less to do with one person's escape from the grave than with the victory of seeming POWERLESS LOVE over LOVELESS POWER. Easter represents a demand as well as a promise, a demand not that we sympathize with the crucified Christ, but that we pledge our loyalty to the risen one. That means an end to all loyalties, to all people and to all institutions that crucify."

And end to any and all loyalties to fear.

For good measure, I like to think as an extra bit of positive reinforcement and encouragement, the risen Jesus appears to the women who are already on their way to share the good news with the other the disciples. Already on their way to Galilee to meet him.

There is no need for Jesus to appear to them now. But he does, and he tells them exactly what the messenger, the angel, said: "Fear not."

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The good news of Easter is that love is life, because love is liberation from the destructive, crucifying, as-thought-dead grip of fear.

May we hear and answer the ongoing call of Resurrection that rises impossibly as the upward gravity of love!

And may it be so in our lives and in the world, again and again and again.