

'Do not be afraid.'

Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023

Our Old Testament professor at Knox used to start each class by reading a passage in Hebrew – a language that none of us (at that point) had ever experienced. She invited us to listen closely - to tune our ears to repeated words or phrases. She was fond of reminding us “if it’s repeated, it’s important.” I believe Prof. Dutcher-Walls principle holds throughout Scripture – and so we hear this morning these four words:

Do Not Be Afraid.

Once from the messenger who moves the stone;
and again, from the Living Lord.

This repetition gives us insight into the prevailing mood of the moment.

Terror was on the menu.

The terrible ‘justice’ of the state had made its mark. The thing that Jesus’ friends feared most had – it seemed – finally happened. The threats and accusations resulted in Jesus’ arrest and execution. The events of the last several days have created feelings of dread that cannot be understated. ‘What do we do now?’ ‘Since our leaders cannot be trusted, where do we turn for guidance?’ “Who might be next?”

Jesus most trusted friends are scattered and shaken. Judas has committed suicide. The two Mary’s – well the women don’t seem like a threat, so the women stay. Call it bravery – call it defiance – call it devotion: it was likely all of those things, but the Mary’s are not considered immediately dangerous by the ‘powers that be’, so they are the ones who bear witness.

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Having been at the cross, Mary and Mary come to the tomb, early on the first day. The text says that they came 'to see the tomb.' No mention of the preparation of the body, which has not been completed because of the Sabbath. The two Marys come to bear witness – since the men are nowhere to be found. But they are afraid too.

Do Not Be Afraid. says heaven's messenger.

Can you imagine? Your world torn apart – your friend cruelly murdered – his grave wide open, and a dazzling visitor greets you with 'Don't be afraid?' It must have seemed more than terrifying, until they notice Rome's finest – paralyzed with fear – laying about like dead men. "I know what you are looking for... He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said." This is astonishing news. And I'm not sure that their fear is so easily relieved...

And then, with their heads swimming and their thoughts racing – as they head back to town to find the disciples and share the news, they are brought up short.

Jesus. Alive – it's beyond comprehension. Fear and folly and wonder and worship fill the moment.

Greetings – Jesus says. Hail, is how the KJV translates this all-purpose Greek word – the same word that Judas used to greet Jesus in the garden on the point of betrayal. The word the soldiers used in their mocking salutes to their beaten and battered prisoner. A common greeting is reclaimed for joy in this moment, and the women rush to Jesus and fall at his feet.

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Their grasping, trembling, fearful worship is interrupted by the next thing Jesus says.

Do Not Be Afraid, says the Lord of life.

Jesus echoes the heavenly messenger because fear is deeply held and difficult to set aside. To these bold, faithful determined women, Jesus speaks as the angel spoke – in the present tense; with clear instructions, the next steps are outlined: go here – do this – you will see Jesus. This is the gift of Easter. This is the day our fears are relieved. And Jesus message is the same today as it was then.

Do not be afraid.

Two thousand years on - twenty centuries of uncertainty and conflict; after all this time, and we still find reasons to fear. This beyond our control, we say – there's nothing to do but tremble and wait for the moment to pass. Our faith could help, if we would let it – but we convince ourselves that God has bigger problems, or must be busy elsewhere. Our fear is real; deeply held and difficult to set aside. And it is into this world we declare that Christ is Risen – That God's love is stronger than death. It is in this world that Jesus would lead us to life: abundant and free from fear.

Jesus draws our attention away from the things that frighten us most. He stands in a graveyard and calls us to live - To go here and do this - to discover the risen, living Christ in the wide, wonderful world. And when this seems too much for us – when the events of the day or the state of the world tempt us to give in to our fear and hide from reality, Jesus calls us from fear to faith.

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We know that it works. The women become the first evangelists. They offer the story of their encounter with Jesus. They go, and see, and tell again. The Good news becomes a movement of God's Grace. The scattered, fearful disciples become messengers of Christ's love. The world may still be a fearful place, but fear is no longer the only choice. The tomb is broken and empty. The Lord of Life is Risen indeed. Go. Tell. You will see Jesus. Do NOT be afraid.

Amen