

Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 28:1-10

March 23, 2008 – Easter Sunday

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

If you read the story of the resurrection in each of the four gospels you will find slight differences in the details they report. For example, did Mary Magdalene go to the tomb alone as John says, or did the other Mary accompany her as Matthew says? Did Peter, upon hearing the news run to the tomb by himself, as Luke says, or did John go with him, as John's gospel says? Or, as Matthew reports, did the eleven disciples all just go straight to Galilee to await the risen Christ? Variations such as these make it difficult to construct a neat timeline for that first Easter.

That shouldn't be too surprising or alarming. Something as glorious as resurrection is never neat and tidy.

But there is at least one major commonality between all the gospel accounts: nobody expected what happened on that first Easter Sunday morning. Read any gospel account you choose and you will see clearly that no one was looking for resurrection to happen that morning. The women who went to the tomb that morning didn't expect to find anything different from what you always find in a cemetery – a grave containing the mortal remains of the ones we love. The idea that Jesus would be up walking around and talking to people was so far beyond the realm of anybody's experience or even their imagination that it was the last thing they thought they would see. The women, Peter, John, the other disciples – they were all so flabbergasted by what occurred they simply could not believe what their own eyes and ears were telling them.

So much for the idea that ancient people found it is easier to believe than modern people do. There is a way of thinking that says the struggle to believe – to have faith – is something unique to the modern era. According to this train of thought, belief in spiritual things was easier to come by in the ancient world, because they didn't have modern science to contend with. They didn't have to balance faith against the laws of physics or the laws of chemistry or the laws of biology or the principles of modern psychology. Therefore, it was easier for them to believe in miracles, like, say, a dead man coming back to life.

But we modern folk, who are so much more intellectually sophisticated than they were, who know so much more about how the universe really works, we find it harder to believe. Faith is a much harder intellectual pill for us to swallow.

Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 28:1-10

March 23, 2008 – Easter Sunday

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

This way of thinking, of course, is utter nonsense. It is a perfect example of our modern arrogance. To say that believing is harder for us because we know more only proves how little we really know, because if you read the story closely you will see that – contrary to popular opinion – the people who experienced the first Easter were no more ready to believe in it than we are.

Most of them had been with Jesus for three years. They had heard him say repeatedly that he would die and then three days later be raised back to life. And yet when they actually witnessed that prediction come true, they did not believe it. Luke's gospel, for example, tells us that when the women came back and told the disciples they had seen the risen Christ, "*their words seemed to them like nonsense.*" The discovery of an empty tomb did not cause any of Jesus' followers to instantly assume that he must have risen from the grave, as though it somehow naturally just made sense to their pre-scientific minds. No, their immediate reaction, according to John, was to conclude that his body must have been stolen. Dead people simply don't come back to life. Even people in the first century knew that much.

That brings us to the other major commonality between all the gospel accounts. Choose any gospel writer and you will find that the first reaction to that first Easter was not faith. It was fear. When the women found the empty tomb, they were afraid. When the angel of the Lord told them that Jesus was risen just as he said, they were afraid. When Jesus himself spoke to them, they were afraid still. In Matthew's account, which we have read this morning as our focal passage, twice in a span of 6 short verses we hear the refrain, "Do not be afraid!" Fear, not faith, was the dominant emotion that morning.

As it turns out I guess we aren't all that different from our forebears after all. Sure, we may have more in the way of scientific advancement. Our overall body of knowledge may be larger than theirs, but for all our sophistication, we are still fearful people. Knowledge alone isn't enough to trump fear, because I believe that we are just as afraid today as we have ever been. In fact, I don't think it is overstating the case to say that fear may be the most accurate descriptor of these times in which we live. We are afraid of the economy; we are afraid of

Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 28:1-10

March 23, 2008 – Easter Sunday

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

terrorists; we are afraid of pandemic disease; we are afraid of crime; we are afraid of people with dark skin tones or strange accents. We are afraid of death.

Not all fear is bad. God created us as creatures capable of experiencing fear, so it has to serve a useful function. Namely, fear is a kind of built-in warning system that can keep us from doing foolish or harmful things. In the right times and the right proportions, fear can be a good thing.

But it doesn't take a well-developed imagination to realize how quickly fear spills over from the realm of the reasonable and the healthy into the realm of the irrational and destructive. Fear quickly paralyzes. Fear keeps us from being the free people God created us to be. Why don't we give away more of our resources like God asks us to? Simply put, it is because we are afraid that if we give more, there won't be enough for us. Why don't we take more chances with people? It is because we are afraid our trust will be violated. Why aren't we more prone to forgive the way God has forgiven us? It is because we are afraid that we will only get hurt again. Why don't we take up our cross and follow Jesus? It is because we are afraid that the life God holds out for us won't be as good as the life we have created for ourselves. Fear abounds.

But once again, what if our fear also reveals just how little we really know? I remember being told at some point early in my life that the value of an education is that it expands your horizons, makes your world bigger. But I wonder if in our endless quest for knowledge we haven't actually narrowed our horizons. We have shrink-wrapped our world. Everything is reduced down, buttonholed, manageable, controllable. We know what is supposed to happen and when and how. There is nothing going on here beyond what we can see and understand.

But if the world operates solely according to the categories we understand, then is it any wonder we are so afraid? Because we know enough to know that the world is a dangerous place. We know that there are bad things that happen out there. People get hurt, taken advantage of, violated. In the end, people die. And if there is nothing going on out there beyond what we see and understand, then you'd better not take any chances. After all, you only get one turn around the block, so protect yourself and don't let anyone cheat you out of what you've got coming.

Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 28:1-10

March 23, 2008 – Easter Sunday

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

But the resurrection of Jesus suggests that there is more going on out there than meets the eye. If Jesus really has come back to us from the dead, then it means that creation's horizons are broader than we ever imagined – infinitely broad, as a matter of fact. If Jesus really has come back to us, that means there is an unlimited supply of what we need most in this world, namely love and life. In God's economy, such things will never run out.

Yes, bad things will happen. Not even Easter is a guarantee against that. Jesus could only experience resurrection after first going through death. We can't expect anything less for ourselves. "In this world you will have trouble," Jesus told his disciples. But not even that is enough to trump the life that is ours in Jesus Christ. The message of Easter is that nothing, not even death, can undo what God has done. God's purposes and plans for his creation cannot be defeated, not even by the worst evil we can conceive. The piles of rubble at Ground Zero, the cancer lab at the hospital, not even the banging gavel at divorce court or the pink slip from the company— none of this is enough to triumph over what God has in store for those who love His resurrected Son, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

That is why I think it is no accident that the first thing the resurrected Christ said to the women was not "believe." Sure, belief is important, but the point of Easter is not simply to test our modern brain and see if we can bring ourselves to accept an idea that many people reject. Belief matters, but the purpose of Easter is greater than just that. That is why the first thing the resurrected Christ says is: "Do not be afraid." The message of the resurrection is: live without fear. Trust that there is enough – enough life and enough love – to sustain for all eternity, no matter what comes. Be hopeful and courageous. Give. Serve. Love. Forgive. Let yourselves go with reckless abandonment into the purposes of God. For in the end, none of it will be lost.

And neither will we.

Thanks be to God. Amen.