

The Resurrection of our Lord

April 20, 2014 + Matthew 28:1-10

Earthquakes. Rocks splitting open. The dead emerging from their tombs. A large curtain ripped apart from top to bottom. An angel descending from heaven. The angel rolling a large stone away.

What does this sound like to you? A Steven Spielberg movie? Special effects for an action packed film or a TV program highlighting the natural or not-so-natural wonders of the universe?

It could be any or all of those things, but for us gathered here this morning, these events are all part of the Easter story. No bunnies or dyed eggs. No springtime cheer. Instead, an earth-shattering and earth shaking event. This is how Matthew tells the story of Easter.

It's a grand story that tells of the shaking of the earth and the beginning of a brand new age.

And the way Matthew tells the story; these grand wonders or special effects don't begin at the empty tomb. They begin a chapter earlier at the time of Jesus' death. No sooner does Jesus breathe his last than the Temple Curtain is ripped in two, the dead begin to emerge from their graves, and the earth quakes. Then it continues when the women go to the grave. The earth shakes again and an angel descends rolling back the stone and sitting upon it. Now, that's enough to make anyone afraid. It frightened the guards watching the tomb so much that they fainted at the sight of the angel. This is one of the few times when an angel actually scares people, a far cry from the cute little cherubs that fill our angel imaginations.

Naturally, we are afraid when we encounter out of the ordinary events like these. Why, there was an earthquake, just a couple of days ago, on Good Friday, of 2.7 magnitude shaking up central and southern Mexico causing buildings to sway and people to escape from high rises. And we know how such things can destroy communities and structures and take lives away, but here the shaking of the earth and the magnificent events signal not the end of lives or destruction, but something quite the opposite.

In this Easter story, rocks splitting open, curtains torn in two, the earth shaking, and a rather forceful angel rolling back the stone from Jesus' tomb signals not destruction, but life. Here the power of God testifies to a new power let loose in the world.

For, what does the angel say to the two Mary's who come to the tomb? "Do not be afraid."
Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.

God's earth shattering and rock splitting power isn't meant to incite fear but to open up a new age of love.

So the angel, messenger of God, says "Do not be afraid!"

When was the last time someone told you that?

When was the last time you heard that message?

Sometimes I think the overriding message we get is this: "Be afraid, be VERY afraid," and with that message we get easily overwhelmed and may even live fearfully or be ruled by fear.

We hear of tragedies like a large ship sinking to the bottom of the ocean off the South Korean Coast or natural disasters or hideous crimes or corruption in the halls of government and we become fearful. Our trust wanes and at times, the world seems like a dangerous place and the message is "Be afraid, be very afraid."

Last Tuesday was Tuesday of Holy Week, but I bet for most of us, it was mainly "Tax Day." Now, did that incite fear or panic in anyone? Long before the April 15 deadline my wife and I were getting a little anxious about the ominous task ahead of us. How about you? "Be afraid, be very afraid."

Our lives are busy. Our calendars are filled, our tasks never seem to get done, we become frenetic and anxious. We may spend so much energy trying to meet expectations – our own or others that we get hemmed in by fear "Be afraid, be very afraid."

This past week I found myself doing the thing I normally do during most Holy Weeks, obsessing over the details and making sure its gets done right. When will I learn that being in control is an illusion? (Although I've been told that I'm a lot more relaxed than in previous years) Sometimes fear seems to occupy more of me than I would like. That little message pops up and says ... "Be afraid, be very afraid."

Every time I go through the security check at the airport, you know, where you have to put all your stuff on a conveyer belt and take off half of your clothes, the overriding message seems to be that we are not safe "Be afraid, be very afraid!"

Do you find yourself afraid and anxious about money?

Are you afraid you won't measure up?

Are you afraid of failure? Do you fear the future?

Do you harbor a secret fear that people will find out that you
are a person with real foibles and flaws?

Maybe they will discover you are a fraud!

Do you find yourself becoming fearful around change?

Newness while holding great promise, frightens because it is not what we are used to ...

Sometimes we're afraid of people who are different than us - people who appear differently or act differently or have opinions vastly different than our own.

When the message is "be very afraid" that message may direct our behaviors in ways that are destructive and we find ourselves living in judgment of others or behave in ways that are violent or we nurture our incessant need to be right.

Jesus knew all about this sort of thing. He caused people to be afraid, not the ones hungry for God's mercy but the "powers that be," namely the religious and political establishment that nailed him on a cross. He posed a threat to them. Jesus knew all about the behavior that is driven by fear. That's what got him in trouble and nailed him to a cross. The "powers that be" conspired to kill him.

But, here's the good news. While the "powers that be" said no to Jesus, the power of God said yes.

As soon as the rocks split open, the dead emerged from their tombs, the curtain in the temple was split open, the stone rolled away and the earth began to shake, God issued forth another kind of power. God said yes to Jesus and the way of Jesus.

For what did the angel sitting atop the large stone say to the women at the tomb that morning? Do not be afraid ... Do not be afraid. He is not here. He's been raised, just as he said. Go on to Galilee. There you will meet him.

And so they go and the Risen One greets them and they embrace him and worship him. And Jesus echoes the words of the angel. "Do not be afraid."

In the Resurrection, God says YES to the way of Jesus.

For while the powers driven by fear said "No" to Jesus, the power of God said "Yes."

- Jesus embraced all people. The powers that be said no. God said Yes.
- Jesus forgave sinners. Not only did he forgive them, he ate with them, ministered to them, welcomed them. The powers that be said no. God said Yes.
- Jesus behaved in a non-violent way. He taught it and lived it. The powers that be said no. God said Yes.
- Jesus was a rebel rouser. He broke rules, not for the sake of merely doing so, but when he had no choice but to put people first. He did things like heal people on the Sabbath. The powers that be said no. God said yes.

- Jesus had a special heart for the poor and the least among us. “Blessed are the poor,” he said and time after time stretched out God’s arms of mercy to them and warned against the dangers of excessive wealth. The powers that be said no. God said Yes.
- Jesus loves the suffering and met their real human need – healing the sick, feeding the hungry. The powers that be said no. God said Yes.
- Jesus welcomed all, without discrimination. The powers that be said no. God said Yes.
- Jesus taught and lived radical forgiveness. The powers that be said no. God said Yes.
- Jesus spoke truth to power. He called out the tyranny of those who would oppress others and step on the marginalized. The powers that be said no. God said yes.
- Jesus cast out demons. He met evil straight on. Such evil is embedded in our systems and communities where people seek control and domination. The powers that be said no. God said yes!

The Risen Jesus meets us here in the power of God’s Word, at the table where we share his very body and blood, in community of brothers and sisters with whom we share faith and his message to us is “Do not be afraid.”

Truth be told, we’re a lot like those two Mary’s who fled from the tomb with a mixture of joy and fear, but that’s why we need Jesus who greets us, just as Jesus greeted them on their way to Galilee. Jesus meets us and in touching us says again and again, “Do not be afraid.” So, we are sent into the world to live the Resurrection life that is nothing less than being Jesus to others. Instead of “be very afraid,” we may say in word and deed, “Do not be afraid.”

And what happens when God us breaks us open? What happens when we undergo seismic changes in our hearts and minds? What happens when our lives are shaken up by the way of Jesus and the love of God? What happens when freedom from fear gets in our body, mind and soul?

By God’s grace we may overcome fear and live in the way of love.

Just yesterday I read in the paper one such story ... Muslim leaders in the Sacramento area delivered 300 gifts on Friday to the First Covenant Church in Rancho Cordova. This is part of an inter-faith relationship that began a couple of years back between this Christian congregation and the SALAM Islamic Center. They described it as a gesture of goodwill and a show of love and respect for their Christian brothers and sisters during this holiest time for the Christian community.

First Covenant did something very similar last year when they served *iftar* dinners for hundreds of Muslim during the month of Ramadan. The word means “breaking the fast.”

During Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to dusk and then break the fast with an *iftar* meal after sundown. Their Christian friends reached out to them in one of their holy times.

Prejudice that begins with the fear of the other has broken down. It wasn't long before the church sponsored a family of four Iraqi refugees, all of them practicing Muslims. The pastor and his wife befriended the family and said that loving someone of another faith didn't compromise their own faith. Not at all.

Soon after this, the congregation began to sponsor other refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan; many of them Muslims and the Christians and Muslims in this community have forged relationships of common respect and mutual love, fear giving way to the power of love.

What did the angel say? What did Jesus say? Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid!

The Resurrection of Jesus frees us from fear and sets us on a path of new life, following Jesus, which isn't always easy, but is grounded in a sure and certain love that will not let death have the last word. For the one who said yes to Jesus, says, through Jesus, YES to us!

The power of God isn't about domination or being right or strong arming one's way to heights of glory, it looks a lot like the way of Jesus. The power of God is the way of mercy and the way of love. Love is the power let loose in the world that changes, transforms, heals, shakes us up, and will one day be all-in-all!

God said YES and Jesus was raised and so Christ is risen!

We are filled with wonder and awe by the good news and Jesus' life-giving presence. Even the earth trembles at the joy and the wonder ...

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!