

# The Emptiness of Fear and The Power of the Resurrection

## Reading

Isaiah 25.1-6

Psalms 118

Colossians 3.1-4

Mark 16.1-8

## Opening

I imagine that for years to come, we will remember where we were on Easter weekend 2020. Less than 10 people were permitted in any public building a year ago. I remember the sadness of being at home when we would have gathered for the Easter Vigil. We just couldn't celebrate the Great Vigil with clergy and musicians but no congregation. One year ago on Easter weekend, the only eyes I could see from this pulpit was the lens of a single camera, fastened to a tripod in the location where we receive the body and blood of Christ. How we needed the resurrection story in that time of dislocation; to find Gospel hope in uncertainty and loss.

So, it is one of the best gifts of the past year to look into your eyes this morning. I couldn't contain my happiness even during our solemn Holy Week services because we were together again during these sacred days. My joy will not be complete, though, until we may all safely worship together as one church family in one place. How dear are our precious brothers and sisters who faithfully join us and worship from home today; also those who will gather outdoors this afternoon. We thank the Lord for the sure and certain hope of the

resurrection this morning, even as we long to worship as one church family as we have known in years past.

And how difficult it has been to remain in that resurrection hope in the year now past. Thank God we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord every year on Easter and every Sunday. From one week to the next; from one year to the next, our faith can flag and grow faint. With the psalmist we can say, "O God, you have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried."<sup>1</sup>

Maybe with new eyes we can see our ancient mothers walking to the tomb of Jesus just after daybreak. We come this morning bearing many sorrows of the past year; of holidays shared apart from family; of prohibited visits to our elders and the infirm; of funerals deferred indefinitely.

So, too, had the burial rites for Jesus been suspended. Our Lord received an incomplete burial as sundown approached on Friday evening. Joseph of Arimathea and others administered basic care of the body, but the task was unfinished when the Sabbath began. Spice merchants wouldn't sell their wares again until the early hours of Sunday morning.

Before daybreak, the two Marys and Salome found a place to purchase myrrh to complete the burial work that was suspended on Friday. Myrrh has no small significance in Jewish life, too. Yes, it was the customary spice to embalm any Jewish body. But when priests were ordained and kings coronated in Israel, they would be anointed with oil from myrrh. The harvesting of myrrh is a striking image too. To extract the gum from an Arabian myrrh tree, a farmer would repeatedly wound a tree with blows to bleed the gummy resin from its sapwood. The resin which makes myrrh is blood from the tree.

As it was costly for a tree to produce myrrh, so it was costly for our women to purchase these spices to complete their acts of devotion. Yet nothing compared to the cost our Lord Jesus sacrificed when he hung from the tree; when blood and water flowed from his side.

They were doing what they knew to do when their world ended. Still in shock and in the grip of trauma, they keep walking through the dark. One foot in front of another. It takes

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<sup>1</sup>Psalm 66.10

courage to walk in the dark with fear and grief. This dawn journey took courage because when they arrive, they've got to face Roman soldiers and a stone they can't move. They have no other advocate or defender if the guards reject their request. Such is their dilemma, a new and practical dilemma, mind you, stacked on top of their trauma and grief.

## Seized by the Resurrection

Their conversation along the road is a discussion without resurrection hope. "Who will roll away the stone from the entrance for us?" Here is another mountain in their way, another reminder of their powerlessness. Life without resurrection becomes problem solving with whatever meager resources and feeble strength you have.

Yet Mark tells his Easter story such that, as the women discuss their problem, *the resurrection has already happened, even as they are making their plans.*

Well, thank God for that ancient wisdom regarding our plans, never more true and wonderful than Easter morning with our three women: "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps."<sup>2</sup>

The Lord established their steps not up to the obstruction, but beyond the barrier. Here was a puzzling, unexpected sight, but not yet a comforting one. Was it a grave robbery? What was behind the stone?

They did not expect an *empty* tomb inside. They had been with him since Galilee, close followers of our Lord Jesus. Jesus plainly told his twelve disciples **three times** that he must suffer and die, **then** he would rise on the third day. Perhaps these devoted women heard the same prophecies, perhaps not. Mark is silent on the matter. Either way, they were much nearer to our Lord Jesus than the Twelve who unquestionably heard Christ prophesy his resurrection.

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<sup>2</sup>Proverbs 16.9

The two Marys and Salome walked into the tomb and met a messenger from heaven, arrayed in white garments, festal clothing. The sight of the angel didn't bring comfort, but alarm. He sees their fear and says "Do not be alarmed." It's the first word we need to hear from heaven. It is the refrain of angels appearing to men and women throughout Scripture. "Do not be afraid." We are sons and daughters of fear, held captive by spirits of fear, but it's not who we were created to be.

"See the place where they laid him. He is not here, he has risen."

The vision of the grave clothes is all the evidence they are given that the Lord is risen. They were witnesses when Joseph of Arimathea bound Jesus in those clothes. Now they are witnesses of the grave clothes unraveled. In the presence of the crucified Jesus, Death and Hell are ultimately rendered *weak*. Paul Evdokimov said we must see the grave clothes because "Finally, this is all that remains of (Hell); just debris, nothingness, emptiness. **Life is elsewhere.**"<sup>3</sup>

The angel gives them a charge: "I was sent as your messenger; you are sent as messengers to Peter and the disciples. To meet the resurrected Christ, you must leave here and seek him in Galilee. There the risen Lord waits for you."

Another Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus, met the archangel Gabriel and professed immediate faith and obedience at the angel's word: "Be it unto me according to your word." Not so with the three myrrh-bearing women.

They sprinted out of the tomb, but not with joy. "Trembling and astonishment seized them." The word for 'astonishment' here means fear and dread, not wonder. On the fight, flight, freeze spectrum, they are frozen at the news *and* the command. Then they flee. Commissioned as messengers, Mark says 'they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.'

There's no reason to think you or I would have been more responsive to resurrection news. That isn't the point. The point is that we're all slow to believe the resurrection of Jesus Christ

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<sup>3</sup>Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, 326.

from the dead. The point is that it's one thing to *hear the news of Jesus' resurrection*, it is entirely another matter to embrace it and let it entirely reorient your life.

I actually find comfort in the women's slow response because I'm slow. And I also find conviction for my unbelief. We're so conditioned to see life and death through a lens of fear, calculating my own strength to meet the trials ahead. Easter morning is decision time for all of us: will you keep managing your fears or will you be transformed by the fact that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead?

What does my strength or weakness matter when Christ is risen? When the Lord is my light and your salvation, whom shall I fear?

The resurrection of Jesus calls for immediate faith and joy, but we're much slower to believe. The women are slow to believe; the disciples are slow to believe.

We focus on the wrong things. We get fixated on *how* things happen, *when* things happen, as if those answers will produce faith. Mark doesn't tell us the moment Jesus rose from the dead. All we have is all we need: "He has risen; he is not here."

Well, thank God the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, not only during Lent, but even on Easter morning. Resurrection faith is just a seedling on Easter morning. It's not all that it can be or will be.

Jesus taught his followers that if they had faith like a grain of a mustard seed they would be able to say to a mountain, "Move from here to there." Well, they didn't even have to make a mountain move, the angel did that for them. Our myrrh-bearing women had to believe with humble, mustard seed faith that the Son of God lives again.

But our Lord also taught us that the Kingdom of God was also like one who puts his hand to the plow and doesn't look back. Easter reveals that fear and death is just 'nothingness, emptiness, just debris' in the presence of the risen Christ. Don't look back on a world governed by fear and evil and death. That world has been overthrown.

Don't look back on the fears that keep us captive. Keep walking. The angel sent the women onward: to the disciples, then to Galilee. Go out to meet the risen Lord. You didn't find him in familiar places: the shadows of despair and death. Go seek him in the land of the living.

## **Journey of Fear to Boldness**

Yet Mark closes the Easter morning episode here with the greatest of cliffhangers in all the Gospel: the scene ends with women seized by fear.

Yet in a strange way, here is where I find encouragement from our story. They kept walking, even when they were afraid. When fear takes a hold of you, one of the worst things one can do is stand still and hope things get better. When it's your soul that's afraid, the best thing you can do is pursue Jesus, even if your faith is not all that it can be or should be.

This story would have had no future had the women not kept walking, choosing to believe that Jesus Christ is risen again. Ultimately, they did not refuse their charge. They *did* proclaim the Gospel to Peter and the disciples. They did go to Galilee. The last moment we see these women in Scripture, they have witnessed the Lord's ascension and they're waiting for power from the Holy Spirit in the upper room.

## **Boldness among Ancestors**

I'm so grateful that Easter is not a single day, but a season. We have 50 days set apart to increase our faith in the resurrection of Jesus. We have 50 days to renounce the reign of fear and transform our minds with power of the risen Christ.

When these dogwood winter days finally come to an end; when the final frost ends, we'll put our coats away. Well, let's put our fears away too, not to take them up again in another season, but to clothe ourselves in the victory of the risen Christ.

Faith is not a feeling; it is a decision to believe that which is *beyond* my feelings. Beyond that which I can feel or think or imagine, there is the very real truth of an empty tomb and the very real fact that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

As we look ahead at the promising news of a pandemic relinquishing its grip, let us remember that we do not gauge our ultimate fears or our hopes on forecasts or circumstances. Lesslie Newbigin said, "I am neither a pessimist nor an optimist regarding the future; Jesus Christ is risen from the dead."

Easter tide is a season to grow in boldness, no matter what the future brings. We see mustard seed faith on Easter morning from the disciples and our myrrh-bearing women, but that's not the end of the story. In the midst of their fears and confusion, they kept walking. They followed the resurrected Christ where he called them.

And here is the wonder of resurrection power: those who trembled with fear Easter morning became bold with resurrection faith. Nearly two hundred years after the Lord's resurrection, St Athanasius wrote:

That death has been dissolved, and the cross has become victory over it, and it is no longer strong but is itself truly dead, (is) no mean proof but an evident surety is that (death) is despised by all Christ's disciples. Everyone tramples on it, and no longer fears it, but with the sign of the cross and faith in Christ they tread it under foot as something dead.

And the proof of this is that human beings, before believing in Christ, view death as fearsome and are terrified at it. But when they come to faith in him and to his teaching, they so despise death that they eagerly rush to it and become witnesses to the resurrection over it effected by the Savior.

Athanasius tells us that men, women, even children not only conquered the fear of death because of our Lord's resurrection, they *mocked* death for its **emptiness**. Athanasius may have had in mind the most beloved martyrs of the early church, who faced death a mere 150 years after our Lord's resurrection.

Time forbids me to tell you of the boldness of the 22 year old young woman Perpetua, and a slave girl named, Felicity, who entered an arena with bulls with the boldness of Christ,

dying for their Lord. Time forbids me to tell you about the martyrs of Lyon, of whose company there was a ninety-two year old bishop, a 15 year old boy, and a young woman named Blandina who suffered unspeakable torture and death in a Roman arena. Read their stories of Perpetua and Felicity, of the Martyrs of Lyon sometime. They all stared death in the face unafraid. The resurrection of their Lord Jesus converted their fears to boldness for his sake.

My brother and sister, you can draw a straight line to those faithful martyrs from our three myrrh-bearing women who kept walking when their Easter faith was but a mustard seed. Keep walking. Put your hand to the plow and don't look back on a life determined by fear. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and he calls you to believe in his risen power for all things. Believe on him who has risen from the dead and we, too, may become bold in our faith, mocking fear and death as mere debris, emptiness, and nothing at all. For the glory of God who is Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Alleluia!