

Living Beyond Fear

Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20

Matthew 28:1-10

¹ After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸

➤ *“but some doubted”*

I’m grateful that statement is in here. This is one of those little details which years ago helped me, and still helps me, believe that Christianity is true. Because, I thought, who would make this up? If this were propaganda then it

would say everyone believed, 100%. No doubters. And, all 4 gospel accounts in the Bible would say exactly the same thing; they would all agree; but they don't. We're told, quite honestly, that there were doubters among the disciples. I'm grateful for that detail of the account.

And, what this tells us is that we will all experience doubts from time to time. We all do, whether you've been following Jesus for 30 years or 30 days. Even pastors experience doubts. If we choose to follow Jesus, there will be times when we wonder, (a) is it true? and (b) is it worth it?

And if you're wondering about that this morning, the good news is, you're in good company! Both in Scripture and throughout history, God's people have struggled with doubts. It's okay to have doubts, because doubts often mean that our faith has a pulse. And I want you to notice one important aspect of this event: the doubters did not isolate themselves, nor were they told to go away ("no doubters allowed here!")—they stayed *with* the community, and, they were welcomed *by* the community.

And when we are experiencing doubts, we need to continue to hang around the community of faith. It's good for us to stay with the community, ask questions, listen, even pray, and have others pray for us. And it's good for the

community to welcome those who have questions and doubts—it helps keep everyone’s faith honest and sincere. In time, Jesus will reveal himself to us when we have doubts. Like he did to doubting Thomas—Jesus didn’t scold him for his doubts. Thomas stayed with the community and eventually Jesus helped resolve his doubts. Jesus is patient and understanding that way.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

I have a little exercise for you: try to remember, what advice was most frequently given to you by your parents or other significant adult in your life growing up—that one-liner or quotable quote. What was it they repeated, over and over, that they wanted to you to know and incorporate into your life? (On the positive side of the ledger, that is! Not any negative messages we may have gotten; I want to focus on those life-giving phrases and messages). For example:

- Practice! Practice makes progress!
- Long time friend whose parents were scientists; after school her mom would say to her: what good question did you ask today? (reflecting their belief that good questions are often better than right answers; that’s the heart of a scientist)

- A friend from elementary school's dad: let mean words roll off of you like water off a duck's back.

How about you? Whatever it was for you, the thing they kept telling you revealed their values or something important that they wanted to pass on to you. They gave you their advice and their warnings because they loved you and wanted you to succeed.

If Jesus is the leader of our lives, the one who loves us and redeems and reconciles us, our friend and our constant companion, then listen to what his #1 phrase is—his #1 counsel to us that he repeats more often than anything else as it's written for us in the Bible. You've heard it from me enough to know...

Fear not. Or, do not be afraid. It's all over the New Testament (and the OT by the way; we just haven't trained our eyes to see it there). Jesus spoke these words more than anything else. Let me give you a couple examples:

In his last words to his disciples before he goes to the cross Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; do not let your hearts be troubled and... *do not be afraid.*" A little later on in that same message he says, "*In this world you will have trouble, but... fear not—I have overcome the world.*" That's what we celebrate every Sunday (because every Sunday is Easter!).

On more than one occasion Jesus asks his disciples, “*Why are you afraid?*” which is the same thing as saying “*don’t be afraid.*” It’s just in the form of a question.

And it’s not just *Jesus’* favorite encouragement to us. The first words uttered at the *announcement* of the birth of Christ by the angel Gabriel are... fear not! It was said to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds in the fields. So when Christ is born the word is “*fear not!*”

And the first words of the risen Christ are... Well, the very first thing he says to the women is “Greetings!” Then he says, “*don’t be afraid. It’s me!* Even the angel said it to the women at the tomb—did you catch that? Do not be afraid.

When the risen Christ first greets them, he is telling the women and the disciples that everything is going to be okay. Think about it, their hopes and dreams were shattered and they were convinced that everything they hoped for was over—their teacher, friend, and hero had just been brutally beaten and killed. Now he stands before them, alive. And he tells them, don’t be afraid. And then he gives them some instructions that he has for them and for their future—what we call the great commission; he gives them a task, and purpose. And then he says to them (to us) I am with you always. I am with you always. To the end of the age. For all time and eternity! What great news!

Why does Jesus reiterate this? Why does he say “fear not” more than anything else? I believe he says it more than anything else because Jesus understands that fear, when not kept in check and handled rightly, is probably the most powerful state of heart and mind that has potential to affect our attitudes and therefore our actions. Fear can affect our daily plans and our plans for the future; it affects our pocketbooks as well as our prejudices (fear is at the core of prejudice and racism; fear *and* ignorance—whether plain old ignorance or willful ignorance). Fear can affect our parenting. Fear influences our reactions to the events of our lives, and can influence our whole outlook on life. Especially during an election year!

Now, I don’t believe it’s possible to live completely without fear, and I don’t think that’s Jesus point or his intent (that’s why the message this morning is “living *beyond* fear” and not “living *without* fear”).

There are healthy and right kinds of fears. We have normal fears when we get married or relocate to a new city or town or a start new job or make new friends. God created us to be risk-takers, to live boldly and adventurously in his presence. When we do that, there will be some fear. This is normal and can be creative and help us grow. It’s a fruitful type of fear. And, a healthy amount of

fear or caution about a global pandemic is certainly called for. It keeps us from doing dumb things and putting ourselves and others at risk.

So the issue is not, will I have fear or won't I? The question is, will fear have control over me? Will I be controlled by fear in my thinking, in my decisions, my actions, and in my relationships and how I treat others? Can I break through patterns and cycles of fear?

Jesus says "fear not" more than anything else because he wants abundant life for us. And he knows that unchecked fear can lead to a constricted life rather than that abundant life.

This is a challenge for us because we live in a culture that seems steeped in fear. We have TV shows like Fear Factor (which went off the air, then made a roaring comeback), and there are more scary movies made now than ever; the horror movie genre continues to be wildly popular. Many news broadcasts, local or national, seem to always begin with the phrase "Breaking news!!!"—and the breaking news is always about something awful—death, destruction, potential economic collapse, natural disaster. You never hear a news anchor begin the broadcast by saying, "Breaking news: Worldwide poverty is decreasing! Girls are being educated and empowered in growing numbers. A kid mowed their neighbor's lawn." For some reason, if it bleeds, it still leads.

We have fear for profit used in advertising, which says, if you don't buy this product you are putting yourself and your family in grave danger—or, you'll just be a loser (everyone else is buying it). And even churches and some of its preachers have used fear as a tool to manipulate people—and that does not reflect the heart of Jesus, who said “*fear not*” more than anything else. And of course, political candidates know all of this so they will play up all of our fears so they can promise that only *they* are the one to really keep us safe, and protect us from all evil (ie, the other candidates).

So, we're kind of steeped in a culture of fear. I was curious about this phenomenon and wanted to do some research, so I got on my computer and typed in the word “fear” in my search engine and among the 515 million results, I found a fascinating site. It's called “The Phobia List.” The Phobia List is simply an alphabetical listing of all of the types of fears that exist—at least according to those who researched it. It's several pages long! It seems like we have a fear or phobia for everything! There are the familiar ones in here: claustrophobia (fear of confined spaces), agoraphobia (fear of open spaces), arachnophobia (fear of spiders—lots of those this time of year). But there are dozens of interesting ones I'd never heard of before. For example: peladophobia (fear of bald people).

We have a fear for everything!

The Wall Street Journal not long ago published a list of what people fear most—their annual top ten list. Granted, it's a list of fears confessed by the kind of people who read the Wall Street Journal, but I believe it accurately reflects a significant cross section of our population; this was published before covid19 hit us, but it seems even more relevant to us now that we're in the thick of it. I'll just read a few:

- #1: Fear of failure (apparently worse than death, which is about #5 on the list, if you can believe it). Fear of failure and all that comes with it—the feeling of ridicule or rejection; you seeing me as incompetent or dumb, which can lead to #2:
- Fear of loneliness—there is a real fear of isolation and being left alone.
- Fear of public speaking (again, higher than fear of death; to which comedian Jerry Seinfeld has said, that means at a funeral you'd rather be the one in the coffin than the one giving the eulogy).
- Fear of death (always makes the list of top fears).
- Loss of physical ability, vitality or beauty—no wonder we have so many body reconstruction and improvement products marketed to us these days.

- Poverty/economic uncertainty is a fear; this is a very real and legitimate experience right now.
- Fear of the unknown or unpredictable—(we're kind of living it these days).

Those are the biggies.

To all of these Jesus says, *fear not!* I am with you, and I love you. Because at the core of all fears, I believe, is **one** deep seated fear. And that is the fear of not being loved, or known and accepted for who I really am. When we peel away the layers, I think that's what's at the heart of all of our fears. Am I loved? Does my life matter? Am I seen, and known by someone? If I open up to you and let you know who I really am behind all of my masks and my mistakes, will you accept me and befriend me and love me anyway?

Because when (not *if*, but when) I *do* fail, and when I *do* get lonely, or when there *is* loss of vitality and physical beauty, or when something unpredictable *does* happen, and even when death comes, fear tells me that it means I'm useless or unlovable and unloved. That I'm utterly alone.

And all of these are lies, lies of the devil—who wants to take the things of your past, the tenuousness of the present, or the uncertainty of your future, and

make you believe that God has abandoned you. You're on your own. And that there is nothing more to life.

None of that is true. God's love is sure and certain, and Jesus' presence is as sure as the air we breathe. And that's the message of Easter, of resurrection: Jesus is alive and he is present to us. We do not need to fear. We are invited to trust in his goodness, and simply realize he is with us.

Here is a delightful footnote on history that I love. It comes from the 13th century in Italy, during the city wars.

The Florentines were attacking the city of Sienna, and Sienna was feeling smug and secure behind a huge walled city—fortressed all around; and they had plenty of store, plenty of food and everything they needed to live out the siege.

But they watched in amazement and horror as the Florentines built catapults. And they began to catapult dead donkeys over the walls into the city. It was actually a brilliant strategy because the Florentines knew the people of Sienna would not open their gates to get rid of the dead animals—it would make them vulnerable to attack. So they hurled these dead donkeys in, hoping their decay would cause a plague or pestilence and disease and kill the people *from the inside*.

I don't know about you but sometimes I feel like someone is catapulting dead donkeys into my life to cause a stink—to smell up the whole thing and create fear. And mess things up in my life *from the inside*.

If you feel like that, Jesus says fear not; you are loved! The dead donkeys may be all around us, but they don't have to get inside of us. That's the promise of Easter—life, not death. Freedom, instead of fear. Protection and purpose and presence as we live out the adventure of faith.

Jesus knows that fear is powerful, but he came to show us and communicate to us that resurrection life is *more* powerful. His love is more powerful. And that's the good news of Easter. We're told in the Bible that there is no fear in love, because perfect love casts out fear. You can put your weight down on that. God's love is perfect love, and we're invited to receive his love and to trust God with our life; to put our weight down on his promises and his presence with us. His promise this morning is: I am with you always, to the end of the age. No matter what.

Let me leave you with a great story about a circus performer from the old big tent days, an animal trainer whose act involved putting a number of tigers through their paces inside of a locked cage (this is before Siegfried and Roy!). One night, to the shock of the audience, all the lights in the circus arena went out as

he was performing his act with the tigers. They didn't have backup generators so it was completely dark inside the tent. He panicked for a moment, but soon began speaking and cracking his whip in the usual manner—he continued his performance in the dark. Nobody could see what was really happening in the cage, so the crowd was terrified for this guy.

Before long—maybe 30 seconds later—the lights came back on and the act continued normally. Later, someone asked the trainer what it was like to be in a cage full of tigers in the dark. He said, “At first I was frightened. I knew the tigers could see me, because they can see in the dark. But then I realized that those tigers had no idea that *I was not able to see them*. That’s when I began to speak and crack my whip as I always do. It worked because they were completely unaware of any change in the usual procedure.

What a great lesson for us: trust, in the dark, what you know to be true in the light. Trust, in the dark, what you know to be true in the light.

And what we know to be the light of truth is that Jesus is alive; that God our Father loves us; that he promises to be with us and provide for us, even through the darkness we experience from time to time. That he helps us live beyond fear.

Jesus never promised a life free of problems or pain. He never promised a life that is predictable or routine (that’s what *we* want, and try to create). In fact

Jesus said, "In this world you *will* have trouble..." Expect it. But in that same sentence he says, "...but fear not, I have overcome the world." Which means what he *has* promised is that he would be with us always. That none of the things we *could* fear will have power over us. That he will love us always; that he will provide for us and remove the crippling effect of fear, so that we may live freely and fully as God intended for us.