

SERMON – EASTER SUNDAY
MATTHEW 28:1-10 AND COLOSSIANS 3:1-4
APRIL 12, 2020

Not quite 4 months ago we gathered for worship and heard these words – *“do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”* I’m sure most of you could recite the rest of that passage by heart – dazed shepherds leaving their flocks saying; *“Let us go see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.”* It strikes me how in the two most important stories of the Christian faith fear and joy are the paired emotions.

What is it we might ask, that makes people afraid? A better question might be why does God, quite aware of our fear, insist we not be, particularly when He reveals himself to us? Why in place of simply breathing a sigh of relief can men and women who believe God be filled with “joy” – and in the case of both the Christmas and Easter stories, Matthew and Luke take pains to tell, big-time joy – “mega-joy”, unsurpassed, unimaginable joy?

To the question regarding fear, particularly in the Christmas and Easter stories, I admit the sudden, visible, audible appearance of heavenly beings would do the trick for me. Yet I think the fear of both the Christmas and Easter stories has more to do with the introduction of God into our lives in ways we can neither foresee nor control than the appearance of the messengers.

Both stories tell us that the God of Creation loves us – there is or should be nothing frightening about that. Both say the love of God, everlasting and unchanging, is nevertheless not an edict from heaven but a personal, embodied message from a God who participates in His creation in a most amazing, and yet very vulnerable fashion. Our God laid in a cradle and a grave.

Both tell us that this love sets us in motion however, and it’s that aspect of the future and how we’ll love God by living our lives that is I suspect a sizeable part of the fear experienced by the participants in these two stories. And to them I add a third story. Recall that once Jesus was asleep in the stern of a boat that was being tossed about by wind and waves. His disciples awakened him and said; *“do you not care that we are perishing?”* Jesus stilled the storm and asked why they were afraid!

I’ve always been astonished by that question. To my knowledge no one in those days knew how to swim – so to capsize your boat at sea meant death. Why were you afraid?! Yet, even after Jesus quieted the storm the disciple’s hearts were still “disquieted.” Mark 4:41 says *“they were filled with great fear and said to one another, who is this, that even the wind and waves obey him.”*

It seems that fear in so many of the stories involving Jesus is summoned not by his or an angel’s appearance but what their words and the implication of their words for someone’s future will be. In every story faith is not lacking – people all do what God said or marvel at what God had done. It’s just their trust is not accompanied by understanding. Hence reactions such as *“Who is this”...or “Let us go see this thing”...and in today’s Easter story from Matthew a hasty departure from the tomb “with fear and great joy.”* These reactions bespeak a great big “what now.”

It's the "what now" of the moment that begets fear. But it also brings "great joy!" Lots of people in our world today know fear. Psychologists tell us that we are born with "primal fears"- among them death, separation, loss of autonomy, and loss of our sense of being dignified, worthy beings. For twenty years now I have been privileged to preach Easter sermons – and never had the occasion to do so when these common fears of humanity have been so palpable.

In just 30 days over 16,000 Americans and 100,000 people worldwide have died of a stunningly fast spreading illness. We've been restricted to our homes, told to cover our faces in public, wash everything we touch and refrain from gatherings with our families when as Christians we're in our highest, holiest days. Never in our nation's history have so many people lost work or companies seen their business evaporate so fast, smothering them with questions only exceeded by the debts they may have to take on to survive. And lingering over it all is "*where do we go from here – what does the future portend?*"

Never in my twenty years of preaching has the Easter message been more needed and well-timed. Jesus Christ rose from the dead to replace fear with joy. It addresses, as it was always intended to address - basic human fears. As to our own death Jesus in John 11:26 says "*he who lives and believes in me will never die.*" As to our own separation from God, Jesus in Matthew 28:20 says "*surely I am with you always to the very end of end of the age*" and Romans 8:38 adds; "*nothing...in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

As to our own loss of autonomy, Jesus says in John 8:38 "*if the Son sets you free you will be free indeed*", which means principally that we are no longer bound by our sinful desires – smothered, overwhelmed or controlled by them. And as to recent confinement to our homes or loss of favorite activities we might ask - if you live in Christ, does it really matter where you spend your day?

Or is it, as Galatians 2:20 says "*I who no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me.*" That kind of life can be lived anywhere. And finally as to our very selves – that vital question of who we are – our sense of worthiness so easily dented by shame or tarnished by humiliation or failure Romans 10:11 says "*anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame*" and Romans 5:5 says "*hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.*"

How many more promises of God this blessed Easter day could we invoke as we step from our good news of great joy Easter Sunday toward what is likely to be another "sobering newsfeed" Monday? Enough, indeed so many more than the day's challenges they will see us through. They are surer than the future is unsure. Let Easter's blessed assurance – "*he is going before you to your Galilee...there you will see Him*" allow you to then say "*Let (me) go see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.*" "*Who is this that even death obeys, and fear flees?*" God's Christ, your forgiver, provider and friend, the only Son of God, who is Risen...who is Risen indeed. AMEN