4-12-20 online With Fear and Great Joy Rev. Amy Haines

Mt 28:1-10 Easter Sunday

None of us planned for an Easter apart this year. None of us planned to be utilizing new technology to share the foundational story of our faith. None of us planned to be sheltering in place in order to care for one another, for loved ones and strangers alike.

Yet here we are. Scattered. Sheltering. Still asking “how long” until we are together again.

That first Easter, none of them planned to find themselves behind locked doors or in a graveyard. None of them planned for the cross the be the end of the story of their journey with Jesus. None of them planned to be overwhelmed that day with grief and confusion.

Yet there they were. Thinking death had won. Too heartbroken to do much else than gather together in fear.

Resurrection was the furthest thing from their minds that first Easter morning. The agony of the cross was still on their minds. The pain of losing Jesus was still gripping their hearts. They struggled to believe that his death was real and not a bad dream.

In the dawn of the new day, some of the women traveled to the tomb.

There, with a mighty rumble, and a shimmering angel, God broke through their grief and confusion with the incredible good news that Jesus was risen from the dead!

The women struggled to make sense of all that was happening in front of them.

An earthquake. An angel. An opened tomb.

The message of the angel proclaiming,

“Do not be afraid. He is not here; he has been raised! Come and see—

the tomb is empty. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has been raised from the dead and will meet them in Galilee.”

Hurriedly the women left the tomb “with fear and great joy.”

If you had just heard what they heard, if you had just experienced what they experienced, wouldn’t you also leave the tomb in fear and in joy?

They were filled with great joy to hear the good news that Jesus is alive! They may not have understood just how that had happened, but they trusted enough in the power of God to know that it was so.

They were filled with great joy that they were chosen as witnesses to the disciples, for a woman’s word at that time could not even be trusted in a court of law. But God had chosen them to share the good news of resurrection!

They were also filled with fear, wondering what would happen when the religious leaders found out Jesus was alive. When the guards gained consciousness and realized the tomb was empty. Would the disciples and followers of Jesus be rounded up and crucified as well?

They were filled with fear that the disciples would not believe them, or would scoff at their story as idle words of nonsense, born from grief.

Mary Hinkle Shore once reflected:

..The women are joyful, but they do not feel exactly safe. They are living in a world where the ground is not staying put under their feet and where the dead have not stayed dead. Neither of these realities would inspire a feeling of security.

 -- Mary Hinkle Shore “The Insecure Tomb” 3-23-08 day1.org

Hurriedly the women left the tomb “with fear and great joy.”

Fear and joy.

How often do we live amid this tension of fear and joy in our own lives?

Regardless of our circumstances, we often experience

..Fear of what may happen to our children in a dangerous world;

joy at the blessing they are to us and, we pray, they will be to the world.

Fear of whether we will have a job in the year to come;

joy at the colleagues that surround us.

Fear about the fate of a loved one struggling with illness;

joy in the gift that person has been to us.

Fear about the future amid problems both national and global;

joy in the present moment surrounded by those we love.

Fear about the future of our congregation and church;

joy in our call to proclaim the gospel.

 --David Lose “Dear Working Preacher: Easter Courage” 4-16-14 workingpreacher.org

Today, as we are surrounded by news of a global pandemic, this tension of fear and joy is heightened.

We struggle to not be overwhelmed with fear of a virus, and all the fear that accompanies this unsettling time. Fear of sickness. Fear of death. Fear of economic collapse. Fear of not paying our bills. Fear that we will never get back to normal. Fear that it will be months, rather than weeks, until we can worship Jesus in person together.

When surrounded by fear, often it is hard to live by joy.

Yet, where have you experienced joy, even in the past month? Have you found joy in the little things—

The glory of creation, as flowers bloom and trees blossom

The innocence of children laughing

The connection of a phone call or text or Facetime?

Have you found joy in the fact that even while separated by distance, we are still the body of Christ praying with and for one another, offering food and assistance to our community, open to new ways to love God and love our neighbors?

True Joy is more than happiness. In December I defined altogether joy as a steadfast assurance that God is with us always.

This is the message of the psalmist.

This is the message of the baby in the manger.

This is the message of the Savior on the cross.

The is the message of the glory of an empty tomb.

God is with us always.

When life doesn’t make sense.

When death and grief threaten to overpower us.

When we celebrate community.

When we marvel at an empty tomb.

For all that we experience in this life, and for eternal life—God is with us always!

The women left the tomb with fear and great joy, not fully understanding, yet confident that God was with them. They had journeyed with Jesus long enough to know that sometimes you trust and obey and grow along the way in understanding.

Barbara Crafton once wrote:

"The resurrection is unknowable in the way we like to know things, the journalistic who-what-when-where-how that we grandchildren of the Enlightenment think comprises truth.

The Gospel writer was different: he was willing to have his life changed before he understood fully what was changing it.

"Actually, this is the only way life ever really changes. You won't understand marriage until you've been hitched for a while – maybe not even then. You're not going to know what it's like to have a baby until you have one. You don't even know your profession until you've been in it a while. Nothing in life is obvious immediately. It all grows on us.

"This is how we must approach resurrection, as well. No, you don't understand it.

But let it grow on you." Then you will be changed.

--Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, The Christian Century, 4-2-12, adapted

“Can Google Solve the Death Problem?” 4-20-14 homileticsonline.com

On that first Easter morning Jesus’ female followers expected death and found an empty tomb. They feared arrest yet were sent forth to go and tell their joyful news. From that time on, their lives would change forever.

Like the women, we cannot meet Jesus without being changed.

..Because resurrection changes everything.

In the resurrection, we have God’s promise that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient—real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality.

 --David Lose “Dear Working Preacher: Easter Courage” 4-16-14 workingpreacher.org

Several years ago, Lee Strobel, at the time a journalist with the Chicago Tribune,

became a Christian and began to open himself to Christ's transforming power.

Increasingly, he found that he wanted the motives and perspective of Jesus to be his own. As he opened himself to Jesus, faith became real to him, and to those around him.

Just a few months after he became a Christian, his 5-year-old daughter went up to his wife and said, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy."

Here was a little girl who had only known a father who was profane, angry, verbally harsh and all-too-often absent. But when she had seen up close the influence that Jesus can have on one person's life, she in effect, said what we all seek to say, "If this is what God’s resurrection power does to a human being, that's what I want for me."

--adapted Homiletics 3-31-02

Maybe this year, more than ever, we can recognize and value the good news of Easter that goes beyond flowers and family, beyond chocolate and egg hunts.

Easter is the good news that God is stronger than death and fear and failure and sin. Easter is the good news of God’s great love for us. Easter is the good news of transforming power and grace. Easter is the good news of a new beginning, God’s ways in our world, that we pray for every week in the Lord’s Prayer. And Easter is the good news that Jesus is always out ahead of us.

Remember the words of the angel to the women?

“Go. He is going ahead of you. There you will see him.”

Do not be afraid, Easter people, to follow a crucified and risen Savior and Lord through life, through death, and into life beyond death. He will always be with us as well as ahead of us.

He is with us even now. As we worship from our homes today in solidarity with brothers and sisters worldwide. He is with us even now. When we find ourselves overwhelmed by fear yet called to faith.

He will be with us, as we navigate the weeks and months ahead into a new normal. He will be with us, as we rejoice and grieve, as we struggle and celebrate, as we navigate new ways to proclaim the good news of God’s love for the world.

How do we respond to God’s good news on this day?

Will we remain hidden in fear, stuck on the words “He is not here”?

Or will we live by joy, confident that Jesus is still with us, for “he has been raised”?

Today, may our faith overcome our fear, so that like the women, we, too, will go.

Go and proclaim the good news we celebrate this day.

The tomb is empty. Jesus is risen.

God’s power has defeated death. Christ is with us always.

Go and live as Easter people,

filled with hope and joy, love and grace, faith and possibility.

He is risen! Alleluia! May we proclaim and live the good news of this Easter day!

Let us pray.