

The sun is just beginning to peak over the horizon. The dark sky is highlighted with pinks and yellows and the light is soft on the earth. Birds are beginning to sing and the grass is still wet with dew. The two Mary's are walking in the early morning light to visit the tomb where Jesus was buried. As they arrive at the tomb the earth suddenly begins to quake - the ground trembling beneath their feet. An angel descends from above like a flash of lightning and moves the stone away from the tomb's entrance. I imagine the women must have been filled amazement and fear but it is the guards keeping watch over the tomb who faint from fear. Then the angel speaks: "Do not be afraid."

It was only a week ago that these two women and the rest of the disciples were shouting hosanna with crowds of people as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey proclaiming the kingdom of God. Had it really only been a week?

It must have felt like an eternity had passed since they had gathered in an upper room to break bread together celebrating the Passover and yet it had only been a few days. And it had only been two days since their teacher, their friend, the one they thought was the messiah had been executed and buried. I wonder if these two women remembered that Jesus had said he would rise on the third day. I wonder if they were heading to the tomb on this third day to see if what he said was true.

Each gospel tells a slightly different version of the Easter story. In Mark and Luke, a group of women are bringing spices to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. In John, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb alone and when she sees the stone has been rolled away, she runs to tell Peter thinking Jesus' body has been stolen or moved. But in Matthew, there is no mention of the women bringing spices and they do not flee in fear even when an angel descends and rolls away the stone. Could it be that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb expecting to find it empty?

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid." After seeing the empty tomb the Mary's are told to quickly go and tell the other disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead and is going ahead of them to Galilee where they will see him. The text tells us that the Mary's left quickly with fear and great joy. Despite the angel's assurance to not be afraid, the women were understandably filled with fear. But their fear did not incapacitate them as it did the guards. The Mary's were also filled with joy, hope, excitement, and faith. And while these did not extinguish their fear, they empowered the women to keep moving, to keep seeking the risen Christ, despite their fear.

The words of the angel "Do not be afraid" are written in the original Greek in a present, on-going tense. This command is by the angel is an on-going one. It is more

than “don’t be afraid in this moment,” but instead “you no longer need to be afraid.” Or as one commentator translated it “Stop being afraid and keep not being afraid.”¹

Running back to the disciples with earth shattering good news, the Mary’s are suddenly met by Jesus. Jesus greets them with a word that has been translated as “greetings” but is frequently translated as “rejoice!” Then he reiterates the words of the angel: “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” Rejoice! Do not be afraid. Go and tell.

It is easy to find reasons to be afraid. Yesterday marked 20 years since the United States experienced its first mass shooting in a school. And just this week, students at our own Garfield elementary were in what is called a “soft lockdown” while police investigated shots fired in the neighborhood. Throughout Lent, racist attacks destroyed multiple Louisiana churches with fire. Holy Week started with the devastating fires at Al-Aqsa Mosque and Notre Dame. We are now waking up on Easter morning to news that more than 200 people are dead and hundreds more injured in coordinated bombings at Easter services and hotels in Sri Lanka. The fires in Sri Lanka are still smoldering and the and many are already rushing to spout hatred and islamophobia in response. Not to mention the more personal, daily things that invite us to be afraid... the bully at school, the uncertainty of the future of a troubled relationship, being laid off from work, the safety and security of our families.

God reminds us to stop being afraid and keep not being afraid. That is easier said than done, but our God is a God with a powerful imagination and calls us to be co-creators of a world in which the peacemakers are blessed and the meek inherit the earth. The resurrection tells us we have nothing to fear, not even death, because nothing can separate us from the love of God. This doesn’t mean that we should not experience grief, or that nothing bad will ever happen, but that we do not need to fear the tomb. We can look death and destruction in the face and know that God is with us and will not leave us alone.

The Rev. Martin Copenhaver put it this way:

“When the angel says, “Do not be afraid,” or when Jesus says, “Fear not,” it is not assurance that nothing can go wrong, because often things do go wrong. It is not assurance that everything turns out for the best, because, if we are honest about it, it seldom does. Rather, it is assurance that, whatever may happen to us, whatever a day may hold, God has the power to strengthen us and uphold us; that whatever we must face, we do not face it alone; that nothing we encounter is stronger than God’s love; that

¹ <http://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/2011/04/matthew-281-10.html>

ultimately God gets the last word; that in the end—and sometimes even before the end—God's love is triumphant.”²

The resurrection does not bring an end to the world's problems; it does not mean that we will never be afraid. The resurrection tells us that in the midst of our fear, in the midst of greed and war and xenophobia, God is creating something new and invites us to join in the vision. In the midst of tragedy, despair and hopelessness, the Mary's dared to believe that death did not have the last word. They dared to believe in hope, in life, in something that seemed too good to be true.

Rev. John Dorhauer, President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ shared an Easter message about hope this week and I want to share it with you as a closing to this sermon. Rev. Dorhauer writes,

“I walk through the world, opening myself up to the daily vagaries of life's unanticipated joy and sorrows. I find myself grateful for a faith that orients itself around one foundational belief: resurrection.

Death did not destroy Jesus. That is my grounding fundament. Like every disciple of the risen Christ, I hear and take to heart the words of Paul who wrote that because of Him “we do not grieve as others who have no hope.” (I Thess. 4.13).

To be sure, we grieve. We worry. We fear. We grow anxious.

We are not immune from any of these powerful and life-altering emotions. In the face of what life can throw our way, we too will succumb to experiences that mitigate our joy. Death, disease, hunger, poverty, injustice, fear, warfare, oppression, famine, natural disaster, climate disruption, political crisis, mass shootings all have their way with us.

They consume our attention. They steal our joy. They strip us of some of the happiness and pleasure that would otherwise be ours but for the sufferings we endure in their presence and aftermath.

There is one thing, though, they cannot do: destroy our hope. The simple belief that death did not contain Jesus grounds us firmly in the horizons of hope. It is perhaps the singular vocational responsibility of the Church, the Living Body of Christ: to procure hope in the face of life's most disruptive and destructive forces.

Hope calls us to play the long game.

The long game of hope believes that the wars in Yemen and Syria can end.

² David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, vol. Year A, Volume 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 348.

The long game of hope believes that peace between Israel and Palestine can come.

The long game of hope believes that our children and grandchildren will again breathe clean air.

The long game of hope believes that the immigrant and the refugee, the strangers and aliens in our midst, will find a new home and be greeted with hospitality and freed from the cages they've been placed in.

The long game of hope believes that entire cities in Zimbabwe and Mozambique and farms in the Midwest destroyed by floods can be rebuilt.

The long game of hope believes that colonial empires can see more joy in restoring equity through reparations than in hoarding wealth accumulated on the backs of enslaved black bodies and displaced indigenous communities.

The long game does not see death as our destiny. It believes that though suffering may endure for the night, joy cometh in the morning. Some new dawns may not arrive as early as others, but we do not lose hope that new dawns are ever before us.

This is where my Easter joy is found: the orientation of hope. It is found in the beating heart of every disciple of Jesus who, once again, will rehearse the remarkable story of his rising from the dead. The miracle of hope in the heart is my Easter joy.

May it be yours as well.³

May the miracle of hope be our Easter joy. Alleluia and amen!

³ http://www.ucc.org/news_resurrecting_hope_an_easter_message_04162019