

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 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."<sup>1</sup>

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.

The angel says don't be afraid.

The newspaper headlines describe a bomb that we dropped in Afghanistan nicknamed the "mother of all bombs" and Russia is responding by reminding the world that it possesses the "father of all bombs" which is bigger and more destructive.

Jesus says don't be afraid.

North Korea paraded missiles and bombs and guns to celebrate the birth of nation's founder.

They say don't be afraid.

The powers of the world need our fear to continue to prioritize war and destruction over caring for the earth and for God's beloveds. But God reminds us to stop being afraid and keep not being afraid. It's easier said than done, but our God is a God with a powerful imagination call us to be co-creators of a world in which the peacemakers are blessed and the meek inherit the earth.

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

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 can or should avoid 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 ultimately God gets the last word; that in the end—and sometimes even before the end—God's love is triumphant."<sup>2</sup>

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.

Author Robert Fulghum dared to believe in hope when he wrote the following over 30 years ago in his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*:

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

“Maybe we should develop a Crayola bomb as our next secret weapon. A happiness weapon. A beauty bomb. And every time a crisis developed, we would launch one. It would explode high in the air - explode softly - and send thousands, millions, of little parachutes into the air. Floating down to earth - boxes of Crayolas. And we wouldn't go cheap, either - not little boxes of eight. Boxes of sixty-four, with the sharpener built right in. With silver and gold and copper, magenta and peach and lime, amber and umber and all the rest. And people would smile and get a little funny look on their faces and cover the world with imagination.”<sup>3</sup>

This image of hope might feel futile when faced with images of the war in Syria and famine in South Sudan. As we look around the world, we see the body of Christ continuing to be crucified. The body of Christ, of which every human being is a member, continues to suffer and die at the hands of the fearful, the hands of the powerful, the hands of the corrupt. In the midst of these times of continued crucifixion, these times of bombs and shootings, and escalating military actions... do we believe that with the help of God, we do not need to fear? Do we dare to believe in hope? Are we willing to stand at the entrance of the tomb and seek life? Will we accept God's invitation to be courageous and joyful even in the midst of our fear?

While today is the day we celebrate Easter, Easter is only beginning. The promise of Easter is not only what God did 2000 years ago, but what God is still doing. God is beckoning us into new life, inviting us into new possibilities in which forgiveness and love have the last word. Easter is far from over my friends. May we refuse to let fear and death have the final say. May we have the courage to proclaim that nothing we encounter is stronger than God's love. Alleluia!

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things* (New York: Random House Inc., 2004), 161.