

Fear of the Unknown

Although Easter is one of the two most joyful holidays in the church year – the first Easter had a healthy dose of fear mixed in with the joy.

It was dawn – the same time that we schedule Sunrise Services – before the sun peeks over the horizon, but its light gives an ethereal blue glow to the sky – just enough for the women to see by. Mary Magdalene and a woman that John refers to as “The Other Mary” – probably Jesus’ mother – are headed to His tomb to check on His body and to put more spices on it – if the guards will let them.

This was a common practice in ancient Judaism, to visit a tomb until the third day, just to make sure the loved one was really dead. The women were still trying to come to terms with what they had seen happen to Jesus – so they were not at all prepared for what awaited them.

An earthquake shook the ground. An angel came down from heaven and rolled the large stone – with the seal of Pontius Pilate on it – away from the entrance, then sat down on it. He shone as brightly as lightning, with brilliant white clothing – clearly, not an ordinary human being.

The guards who had been posted at the tomb shook with fright and either froze or fainted – because of the appearance of the angel, and because they knew that they would be executed for not stopping this celestial tomb raider. Later in this passage, they are more than willing to promote the story that Jesus’ disciples had stolen His body – in exchange for protection from Pilate’s potential wrath.

Then the women arrive. And the first words the angel speaks to them? “Do not be afraid. I know you’re looking for Jesus, but He is not here; He has risen, just as He said he would.”

Pardon me, but how does that ease their fear? They had seen Jesus die, and had watched Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus place His body in the tomb. Their minds could not reconcile the words “He has risen” with the reality of Jesus’ death. Even reminding them of Jesus’ promise to rise doesn’t help them overcome their fear.

Neither did the Scriptures which – starting with our passage from Job – indicated that the Messiah would not be left in the place of the dead:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!

The writer of Psalm 118 said much the same:

I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done.
The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me
over to death.

In that moment, it is likely that neither Jesus’ words nor those Scriptures came to their minds. Then the angel told them to look at the empty place on the stone slab where His body had lain. Apparently, the physical evidence did not help them, either.

So he tells them to go quickly to tell the disciples that Jesus has come back to life and will meet them in Galilee. And he finishes with a rather abrupt, “Now I have told you.” In essence, the angel was saying to them, “So what are you waiting for? Get going!”

The women left in a hurry – and Matthew tells us they were “afraid (there’s that word again), yet filled with joy.” Afraid of what? Perhaps they were afraid that the guy on the stone was lying to them. Maybe afraid that their grief was making them hallucinate. Maybe afraid that the angel’s message was true, but that the risen Jesus was just a shadow of His former self – more ghostly, like Jacob Marley. Or that His resurrection was just temporary. Clearly, they were afraid of allowing themselves to feel joy.

Or just afraid because they didn’t know what had really happened or what to expect – a generic fear of the unknown. There is something about the unknown that puts us all on edge, isn’t there?

A woman from one of the churches I have served feared the worst in every situation. When she had to have surgery to remove something that didn’t look right on her scan, she was scared to death that it would be cancer. As I prayed with her before her surgery, she kept saying, “I’m so afraid it’s cancer. What will I do if it’s cancer?” When the surgeon came out to tell us it *was* cancer, the family wanted me to break the news to her. There are days

I saw her just after she woke up. She looked at me and said, “It’s cancer, isn’t it?” I nodded and told her, “I’m afraid so, but they’re optimistic about treating it.” A look of peace came over her face as she said, “We’ll have to get the chemo started right away.”

Knowing that it was cancer was manageable. *Not knowing* was terrifying.

So not knowing and with their heads spinning, the women ran to share the bewildering news with the disciples. Then Jesus suddenly showed up on the road – as Matthew put it, He came face-to-face with them – and He greets them, as though nothing spectacular or miraculous had happened.

This is even more unnerving than seeing an angel sitting outside the empty tomb. They have no way to understand what they are seeing, so they react accordingly – with fear. After all, you cannot have a conversation with a dead person, right?

My wife Diane is the membership chair for the Big Band 200 Club – which organizes ballroom dancing events at the Shrine in Elm Grove. Part of her job is to send out letters every year to all the members, inviting them to subscribe for the upcoming season.

This one couple from the Zanesville area had been dancing with us for years, and we loved to watch Jim and Kathryn on the floor together. Several years ago, Jim sent a note saying that he would not be renewing his membership because he had “lost his dance partner of 46 years”, and asking if we could recommend a woman of similar height and ability. We were crushed. I resolved to send him a sympathy card, but just never got around to it.

More than a year later, we were at a dance and I caught a brief glimpse of a woman – who looked just like Kathryn – walking in the front door of the Shrine. I knew it couldn’t be she, so I rushed into the hallway to see how badly my mind was playing tricks on me.

It was Kathryn, whom we had thought was long gone. I stood in the doorway for a moment, unable to move or speak. Not from fear, but from disbelief and confusion. Then I walked over to her, hugged her, and said, “You have no idea how happy I am to see you!” When I told Diane, her initial reaction was also one of disbelief – and then relief that we hadn’t sent the sympathy card. We never did tell Kathryn what Jim had written or what we had thought. By the way, she is still living. He died about two years ago.

As we talked about it later, we realized that the note could have been interpreted several ways. And we had no other evidence to support our assumption: we never looked up an obituary online, and none of the other dancers had ever mentioned her passing. We certainly had not witnessed her death and burial – as the two Marys had – so we were not afraid when Kathryn walked in. We were just befuddled and happily surprised.

The women, on the other hand, were confused and terrified. Jesus understood this and spoke peace to their fear: “Do not be afraid”, using the same loving voice He had used to speak to them before He went to the cross.

Jesus also reassured them with his physical presence, as they were able to clasp his very real, very tangible feet. And then – just as Jesus did when Peter was afraid during his first encounter with Him – He gave them a mission. He sent the women on their way to tell His disciples to meet Him in Galilee – confirming the angel’s message.

Jesus appointed the women to be tellers of the good news to the other disciples – an assignment which was fraught with fear. In first-century Judean culture, would anyone believe such a story – especially from a couple of women?

Ironic, isn’t it? Jesus tells them not to be afraid of the unknown – and then sends them right into the unknown. As He does with us. He always has a mission for us.

Which of your fears is Jesus speaking peace to today? Fear of inadequacy? Fear of circumstances? Fear of death? Fear of the unexplainable? Fear of hell? Fear of being conquered by something or someone? Or just a generic fear of the unknown?

What is your fear of the unknown? A doctor’s appointment this week? Not knowing whether you’ll have a job next month? Will your kids continue to walk with Jesus? Will the car start when this service is over?

Whatever your fear, Jesus tells you not to be afraid, and then He gives you a mission. And what mission is He sending you on?

Certainly one of them is to share the news of His resurrection. After all, it is an essential element of our faith. As Paul wrote to the Roman Christians: “If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

That is the greatest good news of all time. And Jesus has commissioned us to pass it along. But He has promised that we will not be alone as we do it. Matthew’s account of the Gospel ends with Jesus’ promise, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The risen Christ is always with us – so we can go out into the unknown without fear.

Amen.

