

Don't Be Afraid

(Mt. 28:1-10)

Here are the headlines from last week:

"The next day ... the chief priests and the Pharisees see Pilate, saying, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.'

Therefore, secure the tomb until the third day; or his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He's been raised from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."

Pilate says to them, "Take some soldiers, secure the tomb."

So they go with the guard and make the tomb secure by sealing the stone."

That headline is followed almost immediately by the horrific bombing of two Coptic Churches in Egypt, as our sisters and brothers wave their Palms last Sunday, only to be blown to smithereens by ISIS terrorists, who use terror to secure their caliphate.

Then comes Assad's Sarin gas murder of his own people, as he works to secure his dictatorship.

Our president, intent on securing his role, responds with a missile attack into Syria.

Meanwhile, North Korea's psychopathic leader trades insults with our president, as US warships steam toward the Korean peninsula, while Russian warships head for the coast of Syria.

The message, from Pilate and the chief priests to ISIS and Putin and Trump and the boy dictator of North Korea, it's the same message:

"Be afraid, be very afraid!"

Which brings us to this morning, as shattered, heartbroken women make their way to the sealed tomb of Jesus, just before sunrise, expecting, as we all expect, that death has had the last word, that love and kindness and joy are nice, but they are exceedingly weak, they don't last, that real power is found in the sword, the missile, the bomb.

And yet, despite all of these headlines, the unimaginable happens...

Lo and behold, the finger of God, appearing in the form of a cheeky angel, releases the rock from its seal, pushes it aside and plops right down on top of it, dusting off his hands as if to say, "Well, enough of that!"

And lo and behold, the death that the tomb is intended to secure is nowhere to be found, as the finger of God, appearing as an angel, says to the women the most earth shaking words of the Christian faith:

"Don't be afraid!"

Thinking of those churches in Egypt that suffered so brutally last week, it was a marvelous thing to read just this morning that rather than cancel Easter services, the bishops and the people indeed gathered in the blood streaked cathedral, thousands of them, shouting out, with Christians around the world, "Alleluia, Christ is risen, the Lord is risen indeed!"

This is an acclamation not only for our sisters and brothers in terror torn nations.

It is our acclamation as well.

Everywhere we turn these days, it seems the forces of fear and hate and violence are only growing stronger; and many who claim Christ as Lord wonder if the promise of resurrection is merely a pipe dream, or simply the promise of heaven once we die.

It is neither.

As the women flee the empty tomb, in trembling and joy, there is Jesus himself!

Not the shining, transfigured Jesus from that day on the mountaintop, not the Jesus floating three feet off the ground with flowing robes as so many artists imagine, but simply Jesus, on the dusty road, alive....

And he says to them what he says to us; in the face of the powers of this world who insist that we be afraid, who insist that death has the final word, Jesus repeats the core truth of our faith:

"Don't be afraid."

Why not?

Because maybe, just maybe, "if God can raise someone from the dead in the middle of human history, then perhaps death is not inevitable." J. Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 118, paraphrased.

Maybe the resurrection changes the very nature of who we are.

Once we were doomed to death; but God, in whom there is no death, makes us children – giving us God’s life – a life in which death not only does not, but cannot, exist.

“Perhaps the message of the resurrection is that God not only forgives **what we have done**, but that God shapes that forgiveness to change the very essence of **who we are**, from creatures doomed to die – into God’s children over whom death has lost its power. Id., paraphrased.

Can that be the meaning of the resurrection?

That in giving up, somehow we receive?

That in letting go, somehow we are cradled in loving arms?

That in the very act of dying, there is real life?

That’s why the many folks who dress up Christianity as some kind of formula for material success or personal prosperity seem so ill at ease standing outside of this now empty tomb...

The resurrection doesn’t put an end to the world’s agonies.

Our lives aren’t magically transformed into sunshine and roses.

Anxiety and addictions and nations invading nations, as the war machine grinds on, as economic structures mercilessly crush the poor and middle class, yes, there is pain aplenty both before and after the stone is rolled away from the empty tomb...

But what if the resurrection is NOT intended to be a marvelous escape from the world’s pain and suffering; what if the resurrection is intended to take us directly INTO the world’s pain and suffering?

In other words, what if we’ve been wrong when we think the resurrection **defeats the cross?**

What if the resurrection explains, interprets, even, **embraces the cross?**

The brave women fleeing the tomb know this.

That's why they're running!

They are right to be frightened, because discipleship is a frightening thing!

The resurrection of Jesus means "that our civil religion, the religion that paints god in the red, white and blue, the "god" we claim to trust, (and we prove it by saying so on our money), the god who blesses our wars and economies and bigotries, that god is a lie. Id.

The so-called wise men who tell us that war and economic disparity and dog eat dog are simply the way things shall always be.... it is a lie.

The truth is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's "yes" to a humanity dying for compassion and gentleness and decency and friendship – a "yes" that endures all things, hopes all things, believes all things; a "yes," that even when it is killed, refuses to stay dead!

We are called to live lives that reflect the life of Jesus; lives of non-violence; lives of self-sacrifice; lives that at the beginning of the day and at its end, place all fears, all hopes, all anxieties into the hands of the good Lord who creates all that is.

It's completely unrealistic, I know.

Stand on this ground in polite society and you will be laughed at or perhaps just pitied.

Yet Jesus calls us to live as his followers not seeking pie in the sky in the sweet by and by, nor as a mere private spirituality where all of the battles are internal, but now, in the world, with each other.

We are called to be champions of peace, emissaries of love, especially to the broken, the marginalized, the odd, the weird.

No wonder the women flee the tomb in terror.

To trust God is a terrifying thing indeed.

It calls for the surrender of all that we are, letting go of our best laid plans, our marvelous common sense, not only as individuals, but as a community, and a nation too.

It beckons us into a world where the myth that violence can somehow cure what ails us is unmasked for the fraud that it is; and invites us to live within the embrace of the God whose Word calls all things into being.

This is Easter.

You are a beloved child of God.

Don't be afraid!

+amen