

Fear and Great Joy
First Service of Easter
April 4, 2010

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, '**Do not be afraid**; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly **with fear and great joy**, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, '**Do not be afraid**; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

When I was at Community United Methodist, the youth used to be in charge of a Saturday evening service the night before Easter. And every year, the head pastor wanted to re-enact an old custom he had seen once, where there was a bonfire outside the church and they would carry the light from the bonfire to the church and the whole congregation would follow it and sing and they would then light the candles from that flame and begin the worship service. Now, being downtown Naperville, there wasn't really anyplace for a bonfire, so he would have a Weber grill with wood burning in front of the church. And they would take a torch from the fire with which to light the candles. And every year, he told me that This year, he thought he had figured out how to make it work...and every year I

stood there, cringing, as I watched them trying to light a small candle wick from a torch engulfed in flames. It was always windy, and the poor acolyte always stood there and the flames blew towards their face and I would pray that the candle would light before their eyebrows did. So I have a long-time association with fear and Easter.

I read once that the most repeated line in the Bible, by a lot, is "Do not be afraid". Most anytime God or one of his messengers appears to a person, their first words are, "Do not be afraid." Now granted, here the appearance of an angel was a scary thing. I mean it says his appearance was like lightning and it caused the guards to shake with fear. But there are plenty of places in the Bible where their physical appearance isn't terrifying and yet they still begin "Do not be afraid."

It makes sense when you think about it, doesn't it. I mean, if an angel was appearing to you, if the voice of God was calling to you, it meant that something big was about to happen. Angels don't appear for the little things, whatever was going to happen, it was about to be huge, and people knew to be scared because their lives were going to change forever.

I mean think of some of the people who were told to not be afraid. Moses, don't be afraid, but I need you to leave your home, go back into Egypt, where you are wanted for murder, and tell the most powerful ruler in the world to release his slaves. Jonah, don't be afraid, but I need you to get on a boat, travel to the worst

city in the world, stand in the middle of town, and threaten them with destruction if they don't change. Mary, don't be afraid. I know you are not yet married, but you are going to bear the son of God, the messiah, and everything you know is going to change.

So, when the two women arrive and find the tomb empty and an angel appears to them and says, "Do not be afraid, but the person you seek isn't here. He has been raised up, the tomb is empty, and you will see him again. Go tell the others." Is it any wonder that they run off filled with fear and great joy? Fear at the changes to come, and at the power of the Lord, and great joy in the Good News that they had heard and seen.

Our order of worship today is a little different than normal. It is an adaptation of a service from the Book of Worship designed for the first service of Easter. As I said at the beginning, it is designed to show God's saving deeds in history and it often also includes stories like Noah or Abraham. And all these stories have something else in common, don't they? They are also all stories about change. Out of the nothingness of the void, God created life. With the crashing of waves, God made the people of Israel free. And through the prophet Ezekiel, God breathed new life into his people. Change. Change that brings about fear and great joy!

And that is what today is all about isn't it? What Christianity is all about! This amazing change that we celebrate today. Jesus, the mesiah, was crucified. He died on the cross, died that he might be a sacrifice for the world. And today we celebrate...that death could not hold him. Jesus love, God's love, was so strong that he suffered and died for us and then returned to tell us that our sins, all our sins, the sins of the whole world, were forgiven and that through our acceptance of him, we are redeemed! Is it any wonder that on this day people lift their voices and shout Alleluia?! This is a day to rejoice and be filled with great joy! For Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again!

A few weeks ago, I was given a bumper sticker by one of the youth, it says, "Jesus is Coming! Look Busy!" I've got it sitting on my desk upstairs because it makes me laugh, but there is some truth to it isn't there. We enter into Easter with both fear and great joy because we know that this wonderful thing that has happened, this wonderful gift that we have been given, this terrible price that has been paid for us...it makes us wonder if it is really for us. Are we really worthy? God, when you say all your sins are forgiven, do you really know the extent of what you are saying? Do you really know who you are talking to here?

And the answer that comes back to us is, Yes. Yes! We are God's people. Christ's body, the church! Saved by his sacrifice and redeemed by his blood.

We feel fear because while this is a joyous event, we know that there should be change in our lives. We know how Christ wants us to live, how Jesus wishes that we would react to the world around us, and we know how often we fall short. We've been hearing Christ's words and lessons since we were children in Sunday School, and we know that we don't always meet expectations. And so when we come to this day and are faced with this great gift, when we think of all he has done for us, how can we not desire to make this change for him! Christ calls us to love God, to love one another, to reach out our hands to those less fortunate than ourselves, to clothe the poor, feed the hungry and minister to the sick and imprisoned. Christ calls us to go forth and spread the news of this wonderful day with those who don't know or don't understand, and Christ calls us to forgive others...as we have been forgiven!

In the reading from Ezekiel God breathed new life into the dry bones of his people. May this Easter and every Easter be a breath of new life in you as well. As you hear the Good News of the resurrection of Jesus, may the Holy Spirit come upon you with the fire and the desire to seek out ways to change your life to bring you closer to God.

So as we gather together this Easter morning, and the sun has risen and the light is shining through these windows, I say to you one and all, "Do not be afraid, for I bring glad tidings and wondrous good news. Christ has died, and Christ the

Lord has risen for you. The sins of the world have been forgiven. And it is time to make a change. Alleluia! Amen!"