

“Fear Not the Empty Tomb”

Matthew 28:1-10

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

Easter Sunday

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University Baptist Church

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I love the Easter music. How I wish we were all singing it together. We will do it again. This sanctuary is empty now. Dormant except for the occasional preacher and musician. It's almost like a big tomb, an empty one. I swear I can hear the voices of all of you, like whispers of hope. I can hear the anxious anticipation of children, perhaps already hyped up on jelly beans and chocolate bunnies, showing off their new Easter dresses, and clean shirts. I can smell the fragrance of the flowers. I can hear the choir rehearsing down the hall, the ringing of handbells, the ushers getting out copies of the Hallelujah Chorus for us all to sing at the end of the service. I can see the people we have longed to see, all gathered together like we imagine. And I imagine telling and hearing the story once again. But this time experiencing it surrounded by the people that we love.

The words of the late Nobel Laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez ring even more true this year, "If I knew that today would be the last time I'd see you, I would hug you tight and pray the Lord be the keeper of your soul. If I knew that this would be the last time you pass through this door, I'd embrace you, kiss you, and call you back for one more. If I knew that this would be the last time I would hear your voice, I'd take hold of each word to be able to hear it over and over again. If I knew this is the last time I see you, I'd tell you I love you, and would not just assume foolishly you know it already."

Welcome to Easter Sunday, friends near and far.

We all know the familiar Easter story. Some of us even heard it three times. Twice in this service and again at this morning's sunrise service on the church lawn.

Each Gospel writer tells it a bit differently. The constant is the empty tomb and what to do with that fact. The other similarity is Mary Magdalene. Sometimes she's alone. Sometimes she's with other women. Matthew has her with the other Mary. But all four Gospel writers remember her as the ultimate faithful disciple who did not abandon Jesus. With her, we act out the drama of the empty tomb. What we do with that reality shapes how we look at the world. What might she have encountered within herself when she saw it. What might the disciples have had to confront? What are we to do with the empty tomb?

The story in Matthew's Gospel adds an earthquake to the scene—something that doesn't appear in Mark, Luke or John. There was a similar seismic event on Good Friday. An earthquake causes people to wake up and pay attention. To what will we awaken this season? The angels move the stone and the guards pass out in fear.

Fear. It's a constant companion, as is the admonition to fear not. Throughout Lent, we have looked at fearing not the wilderness, our secrets, scarcity, storms, crowds, even our role as sons and daughters of Zion. Now we are facing the empty tomb. We can face it like Mary or we can pass out in fear like the guards.

In the nativity story that began Matthew's Gospel, angels appeared to Joseph in a dream. Here angels appear like lightning in dazzling white clothes, rolling stones and perching on the tomb entrance like the cherubim and seraphim. They speak not in dreams, but in clear voices and

their message to the two Marys is, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he^[a]lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead,^[b] and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ I’m sure they wanted more of an explanation, and if they got one, Matthew did not record it. I would have wanted more explanation. How long shall we stay in Jerusalem? Will we be safe? Galilee’s a long way away. Why do we have to wait that long?

The scripture says that they quickly left the tomb and ran to the disciples in fear and great joy. Fear and joy are not two sides of a coin. They are comingled energies that are part delirium and part realism. The great joy is the miracles they have encountered. The heavenly bodies speaking to them, living through an earthquake, the news that Jesus has risen from the dead.

The fear is also understandable. What happens when the guards wake up. Will they pursue them? Will the pursuit reveal the disciples’ hiding place? Will they try to re-kill Jesus? After all if violence against one doesn’t work, the military often resorts to superior violence against the whole group. What are the implications of this life and death ministry or their death and new life ministry?

Perhaps sensing these questions, Jesus himself appears to them. He says “Greetings.” The Marys immediately recognize him. They don’t mistake him for a gardener as Mary Magdalene does in John’s gospel. They take hold of his feet and worship him. Feet, we know from the book of Ruth is often a euphemism for more than feet. I imagine them hugging him. Was he warm? Was he a ghost? Was he going to answer their many questions? Hadn’t the angels just said, find him in Galilee? We can relate to the urge to hug and hold on for dear life.

Contradicting the angel message—or giving a special message to the tomb-visiting Marys, Jesus says a word reserved only for them: “Fear not; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” What’s in between the lines is, “It’s not just a message from a supposed angel, but one from me myself. You’ve spoken with me, touched me, felt me. This is real. Just as fear and joy are real. Fear Not, Mary and Mary. Send my message on to those who abandoned me. I forgive and I say move ahead. And while fear may well be a companion on this journey, do not let it be a road block. Use that energy to rise above the fear. To put fear in it’s place. To recognize that fear is a tactic used by the enemies of all that is good. It’s a control mechanism. And see I have just set the laws of physics and fear on it’s end. Fear not.”

FDR famously said in his 1933 inaugural address, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself”—he went on to describe it as “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes the needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

The disciples had plenty of reason to fear the empty tomb. First of all, if someone had robbed the tomb, how could they control the narrative? Would they spend time finding out who the robber was? Who among the thousands camped out near the garden tomb for the Passover festival could they accuse? Would they spend their time in litigation or just run.

The other reason to fear the empty tomb is that it meant that the story would continue, not with Jesus as the presence of divine wisdom, but with them as the ones who might carry on the story. How would they do that? They had already planned their escape routes, their retirement plans when the two Marys told them not only that the tomb was empty, but that they had seen him alive. Touched him even. They promised that the 11 would see Jesus alive as well, in Galilee. Fear and joy and terror and hope and confusion and denial all mingled together as they argued about what was next.

It was easier to deal with a full tomb than an empty one.

Fear not, says Jesus.

And I think he gave the message to the two Marys because he could trust them in a way he couldn't trust the disciples. Mary and Mary were the ones with the Fear Not message. They were it's keepers. They would need to remind the 11 often on the weeks long journey to Galilee when fear crept in and the lure of an easy life tempted them. Fear not, they repeated.

We encounter this Easter after a year in lockdown. We encounter this Easter having lost too many loves ones. We encounter this Easter in the midst of a trial that seeks to be a reckoning of a nation that has too long abused people of color at the hands of whites. We encounter this Easter season trying to claw our way back to a sense of normalcy, when both resilience and indifference have been on display in our very lives.

We have a choice, like the disciples did. Will we cower back into our supposedly safe little corners of the world, or will we break free from our fear-based bondage. Will we take the pandemic lessons of resilience, or the stubborn individualistic indifference to our neighbors be our *modus operendi*?

Maybe we will wonder along with the poet Marianne Williamson.

Our Deepest Fear By Marianne Williamson

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness
That most frightens us.

We ask ourselves
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you *not* to be?
You are a child of God.

Your playing small
Does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine,
As children do.
We were born to make manifest
The glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us;
It's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.

So let us rise up, like Jesus, like Mary & Mary, like the reluctant disciples. Let us look in at the empty tomb, acknowledge it, and use it as a symbol of something better that is around the corner, just waiting for us.

We will be together again. And what a joy that will be. We'll show off our Easter finest. We'll bathe ourselves in springtime colors. We'll smell the fragrance of blooming flowers. We'll sing Handel's Hallelujah Chorus. We'll support each other on the journey to be and get better as a people, as a city, as a nation.

Fear not, says Jesus so many times. We need to remember it.

I imagine us together saying Christ is risen and us responding Christ is risen indeed.

And maybe we'll add to it, Fear not.