

# When Fear Turned to Joy

A sermon preached at Peace Hill Christian Fellowship on Easter Sunday, 2014

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## Matthew 28:1-10

*After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.*

*There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.*

*The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."*

*So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Hello," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

People will tell you that you shouldn't give chocolate to dogs. It's not good for dogs; eating it will kill them. That's what people say. And it's probably true. But I once had a dog who loved chocolate. She lived for it.

Every Easter there would be lots of chocolate around the house, little chocolate bunnies, a Cadbury egg, and so forth, usually nestled in that fake, bright-green "Easter Grass." We kids would wake up on Easter morning, see the candy, and be super-excited. We'd eat a piece, but then have to go to church. "After church," we'd tell each other, "we are going to dive into this chocolate! It's going to be like Halloween all over again!"

But then we'd get back from church, and no matter how well we'd hidden that candy, there would be debris, and bits of tinfoil, and no chocolate. The dog would unfailingly find and eat it all, with no ill effects. The world's laziest dog, who spent 364 days a year sleeping on a chair, would somehow develop the agility to leap wholly onto the counter and hunt down all the candy. She would even devour the Easter cake my grandmother had made. "Did everyone enjoy the cake?" my grandmother would ask us later. "Yes, everyone who ate it enjoyed it," we'd say, more or less honestly. The dog lived to a ripe old age, after spoiling almost every Easter she spent with us.

I think God used that dog to put me in the correct frame of mind for Easter.

It's hard for us to imagine the first Easter morning, because we know how the story ends; we know that the good guys are going to win; we come to church on Easter Sunday morning excited and joyful, or at least putting on a happy face. But the first Easter wasn't like that. The first Easter began with sad, fearful people walking to a place where they feared they'd find something sad and disappointing, much like my siblings and me when we walked into the house after Easter Sunday church, dreading what we might see.

These two women—Mary Magdalene, and the “other Mary,” who might be Jesus' mother--had followed Jesus, staking their lives on his teachings and who he said he was and what he could do. And now he seemed to have failed. He had been captured and humiliated and crucified. Nothing had worked out like they thought it would. But he had said he would come back on the third day, so the women were coming.

Out of all those hundreds—thousands?—who had cheered him on Palm Sunday, the whole Jesus-movement had dwindled into two frightened people.

*But something happened at the tomb that turned fear and guilt and disappointment into joy!*

Today we'll look at these verses and see that the risen Jesus reassures the fearful, forgives the guilty, and sends them both out with a task and a hope.

### **The Risen Jesus Reassures Those Who Are Fearful**

Twice in this brief passage, we hear “Don't be afraid”—first from the angel, then from Jesus himself.

The angel, like many angels in Scripture, is fearsome-looking. His face is like lightning—flashing and crackling with power. And his clothes are white like snow (not a nice tasteful white, but a sun-on-the-snow, don't-look-at-it-or-you'll-go-blind dazzling white). He rolls away the massive stone. The guards, who are sensible people, cower in terror and hope he doesn't notice them.

But he reassures the women that they don't have to be afraid. His message for them tells them why their fear can turn to joy: “You've come looking for Jesus, the crucified one. He is not here; he has been raised, just as he said he would be. Come and see the place where they laid him.”

How is that addressing their fear?

--Death is not the unbeatable enemy we thought it was (“he has been raised from the dead...he is going ahead of you to Galilee”). “The dead” is everyone who has ever lived. I will die, and you will die; we'll all die, and stay dead, because that's the way the world works. Right? Except now, the angel says, someone has been raised from the dead. Death has a crack in it.

--Someone has come back from the other side to tell us about death. One of the scary things about death is that we don't know what's on the other side. Shakespeare's Hamlet is thinking of suicide, but he holds back from death, that “undiscovered country” that no one returns from. But now someone has come back and can speak authoritatively about what lies in store for us.

—It's not just a happy hallucination. See, people have had to deal with the fact of the empty tomb, and they've come up with many explanations for it, some plausible and some silly. One popular explanation is that hundreds of people who claimed to see the resurrected Jesus, as individuals and groups, were hallucinating the same thing. But the angel says, "Come and see!" He doesn't say, "Don't look too closely, just believe it." He invites them to investigate it for themselves.

--Jesus' words have been proven true in a unique way ("just as he said he would be"). Jesus' teaching had never been just good advice for life. It had been all wrapped up in his claims to be the Son of God. He had claimed that he would die and would be raised to life again. If he had died and then failed to return, that calls into question everything he said, since his teachings were all founded on his claim to be divine. But he did not remain dead. This sets him apart from all other sages, prophets, and religious leaders, no matter how wise or kind they were. His words, unlike those of any other teacher, have been vindicated by the Resurrection.

The angel has come not to bring judgment but to tell good news. They don't have to be afraid that Jesus' mission has failed, that he has let them down, that God is looking for someone to blast for killing His Son. Nor do they need to be afraid of the guards or of the authorities who were so desperate to silence Jesus and his followers.

And moments later, when the women see Jesus himself, he greets them with "Hello." (Some translations say "All hail," or "Greetings," which kind of make Jesus sound like someone from Star Trek, but it's really just "hello.") He tells them not to be afraid. He knew that this was a wild, frightening morning, and that their worlds were being shaken. He also knew, as everyone "knew," that women were second-class citizens, not to be trusted with important tasks or important news (they weren't accepted as witnesses in court, for instance). He knew that they would be afraid of being disbelieved by the disciples and by everyone else...that they had to go convince a room full of men, and then a world full of people, that the craziest claim in history had actually come true. But he urges them to lay down that fear and to trust that the One who raised him from the dead will give them the courage for their task. Later on, he promises them that he'll always be with them.

We today are afraid of many things: war, political chaos, the situations in our lives that we can't figure out or control, the infirmities of old age, the suspicion that we're turning into our parents, our inability to stop doing the wrong things we can't stop doing. We're scared sometimes that the Jesus story is all made up, and that no one has ever defeated death. That's why we need to be reminded again, this Easter, that the angel and Jesus say "Don't be afraid," because the power of Death and the other frightening forces in the world has been defeated. Something has been unleashed in the world that is much better and more surprising than what we expected.

### **The Risen Jesus Forgives Those Who Are Guilty**

So far so good...but what about the male disciples? They were probably afraid of what Jesus would say or do to them. After all, they'd failed him pretty badly that weekend, not long after promising that they would stick with him forever. In his hour of need, they had run away and hidden, or denied knowing him. Most of them didn't even stick around to watch him die. And they weren't here waiting for him to rise again, despite his clear predictions of resurrection. And

the angel's message for them, "He will meet you in Galilee" could be ominous, like "Go to the principal's office and wait for him there." Jesus at this point could be fairly expected to rebuke his disciples, or to unleash horrific retribution against everyone who had opposed him.

But then Jesus adds a layer of nuance to the angel's message. In a turn of phrase so ordinary that we might miss it—but the disciples certainly didn't!—he calls them "my brothers." They are still his family. He is not ashamed, says the Epistle to the Hebrews, to call us his brothers and sisters. (See Matthew 12:46-50 where he said that anyone who does God's will is one of his brothers and sisters.) The disciples didn't deserve this honor. So when Jesus calls them brothers, and wants to see them again, it's a sign that he has forgiven them.

This is much more than just a clean slate, like Jesus is saying "OK, y'all screwed up pretty bad, but my resurrection was a Reset button, and now we're cool." The resurrection demonstrates that God has forgiven our sins—that what Jesus did on the cross was effective. Just as Jesus took our sin on himself at the cross, so he puts away that sin once-and-for-all at the resurrection (as Paul puts it in Romans 4:25, Christ "was raised to make us right with God," and in I Corinthians 15:17, "If Christ was not raised...you are still in your sins"). All the ugly things we have done, Jesus took on himself, and then put them as far away from himself as he is from death, which is to say, ultimately far. The New Testament writers like to say that we have "died to sin."

We not only need a God who suffered the pain of a sinful world (the angel calls him "Jesus, the crucified one," and he still bears the scars of that crucifixion), but also a God who has defeated sin on our behalf. The resurrection says, to all of us who like those women cling to Jesus' feet in fear and wonder, "your sin isn't the final word about God's dealings with you. That's been dealt with and put away now. You are Jesus' siblings. God has freed you to show others the new life that he has unleashed in this world where Life has begun to triumph over death."

Many of us struggle with guilt...we know all too well the ways in which we have failed to live in the way that Jesus would. We know the mess we've made of our homes, families, workplaces, and private lives. We wonder what Jesus would say to us. Maybe this fear keeps us from approaching him. If so, we should remind ourselves of this story, and the other stories showing Jesus' forgiveness of sinners. He hasn't changed since then. He forgives; not begrudgingly, but eagerly, ready to bring them into new work and send them on new adventures.

### **"They ran...in fear and great joy"**

The people in the Easter stories respond with a mixture of "fear and joy" (verse 8). This may seem strange at first, but it's realistic. After all, if Jesus had risen again, then everything these people took for granted had changed. Awe, and even trepidation, were appropriate responses. And as the story goes on, we see that they indeed had a scary road ahead of them. History and tradition report that many of the disciples, obeying Jesus' final command to spread the news about him, met martyrs' deaths—one as far away as India, one in Jerusalem, one in Rome. But we consistently hear that they were known as a joyful people—not blind, not naïve, but characterized by a confidence that the One they loved, the One who loved them, was stronger than any opposition, stronger than death itself.

Because they ran and told people, who told people, who told people, down through the centuries, we who go out from today's Easter celebration are heirs of that same mission: to take this resurrection-confidence (mixed, if we are honest, with fear) into all the broken, scared, dying

places in our homes, families, relationships, and communities. We are not called to know all the answers, but to know the Risen One who comforts the fearful, forgives the guilty, and empowers us to run to our mission with joy.

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