

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 9, 2023

Fear and Joy

Matthew 28:1-10

Father Antuan Ilgit is a priest serving in Turkey. He recently described his painful experience of the February 6 earthquake that devastated parts of that country and Syria. Ilgit said:

I had celebrated Sunday evening Mass in the cathedral with the Christian community made up of Latin Catholics, Maronites, Melkites, Armenians, Arabs, neophytes and Turkish catechumens, and I had gone to bed with all the appointments and plans for the next day in mind. The earthquake at 4:17 changed everything. After two minutes of earth shaking, the cathedral had disappeared! In the courtyard of the bishop's residence, nothing remained but destruction, death and tears.¹

Destruction, death, and tears. There are plenty of those things in Matthew's story of the resurrection. Lives destroyed by the Roman spectacle of crucifixion. The death of Jesus, and all the degradation and dehumanization that went with it. The tears of those who had accompanied him and witnessed his end and his burial. And now the two Marys bring their grief and tears with them to the cemetery, where they intend to continue their vigil. All they want is some time and some still space to be present, to mourn, to watch, and to pray.

Suddenly the ground underneath them starts to shake and shift. A messenger of God, dispatched from heaven, shining like lightning, arrives and moves the stone away. Then, in a bold and triumphant display, he sits on top of the stone. Remember that the angel is God's agent, so what he does signifies that God has defeated death. Come closer and take a look. The tomb is empty. Jesus isn't there. He's out.

One pastor tells about a phone call he receives every Easter from his old roommate in seminary. At some point during the day, his phone rings. When he answers, a voice—with no introduction and no pleasantries of any kind—declares, "Jesus is on the loose." The next sound he hears is the click of the connection ending. It's his friend's quirky way of saying "Christ is risen."²

Jesus' release from death and the grave might seem like a fitting climax to Matthew's story of the resurrection. But there's more. For one thing, more fear. The guards on duty at Jesus' grave have already experienced their share of fright. They're still in shock from the earthquake and the appearance of the angel. And now, the women themselves need some help and reassurance. "Do not be afraid," says the angel.

"Do not be afraid." That's easy for the angel to say. After all, he's not on our side of this divine-human encounter. When heaven shows up on earth, especially in the raising of someone from the dead, fear seems reasonable and appropriate. It's not as if this kind of thing happens every day, as part of the normal course of life. Yet we often associate Easter with the rhythms and patterns of life. Easter is part of a package of renewal that comes this time of the year. The grass is growing. The flowers are blooming. The trees are blossoming. The weather is getting warmer. The butterflies are emerging. The birds are

laying eggs. The bunnies are hopping about. It's spring again. This is simply what happens this time of the year. It's part of the cycle of life, for the planet and for us as human beings. And it's easy for Easter to get gathered up into this annual rhythm of renewal. Over time, Easter starts to feel very natural.

But in reality, the resurrection is anything but natural. On the contrary, Easter is God arriving to set right what has gone wrong in his lost and broken creation. Easter is God engaging and overcoming this present world's destruction, death, and tears. Easter is God contradicting our sinfulness with his faithfulness, so that we may be forgiven and made new. The resurrection is more than just God's rhythmic renewal of the world. The resurrection is God intervening to bring a fallen world to an end in order to bring about a new creation in Christ. That's earth-shaking, world-shattering. No wonder Matthew tells the story in such a way as to remind us that the resurrection wasn't just something spectacular that happened to Jesus, but the decisive event in history, the act of God that determines the future of humankind.

"Do not be afraid"? Maybe there are actually good reasons to fear Easter. For example, it challenges our limited understanding of what's possible and unsettles our sense of being able to create the future on our own. If the redemption of the world involves God raising Jesus from the dead, then our ultimate hope can't be grounded primarily in what science, technology, and human aspiration can accomplish, but in what only God can accomplish. And at a personal, individual level, God raising Jesus from the dead can shake our sense of gaining and maintaining control of life. A risen Jesus, a Jesus who's "on the loose," is free to come to me, to call me, to command and expect things of me that can be disruptive to my pursuit of a safe and settled life.

A skeptical friend once asked pastor and author William Willimon, "Why do you need a supernaturally resurrected body of Jesus to make your faith work. Willimon replied:

I don't *need* a resurrected Jesus. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I *want* a resurrected Jesus. In fact, [in one sense] a resurrected Jesus is a real nuisance for me, personally. I've got a good life, I've figured out how to work the world, on the whole, to the advantage of me and my friends and family. My health is good, and everybody close to me is doing fine. I have the illusion that I'm in control, that I'm making a so significant contribution to help Jesus ... on my own. No, I don't *need* a bodily resurrected Jesus. In fact, [once I truly embrace the resurrection of Jesus], my life would become much more difficult.

[So] when the possibility of resurrection really comes through to you, when the rumor that something's afoot becomes a reality for you, well, you can see why the women [in the Gospel stories] were scared that first Easter.³

No sooner had the angel tried to reassure the women, and sent them off with news for the disciples, than Jesus himself suddenly appears to them. Oh no, more fear. Actually in this case the kind of fear that made the two Marys fall at Jesus' feet and worship him. And what do you know, he tells them the same thing the angel said. "Do not be afraid." At every key moment in their experience with the resurrection, the women are told not to fear. Again, it's less an emphatic requirement and more a comforting assurance. Jesus tells them there's nothing to fear. You need not fear. Remember that this is coming from the one who was dead and is now alive, who speaks with authority, the authority of God.

Whatever fears we may face—the cost of following Jesus, the disruption that comes with change, the surrender of control, the threat of death, the uncertainty about what tomorrow will hold—our fear can be combined with another element in the resurrection story. It's called joy. "The women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to

tell the disciples" (v. 8). Their fear has not completely vanished. It's still there. But as one commentator says of the women, "Their fear ... also now contains joy."⁴ Joy in the sense of a fundamental gladness that underlies our lives as disciples of Jesus.

As I've indicated, this joy doesn't completely erase our fears, but it does help us face them and navigate through them, trusting that the resurrection of Jesus has opened the way into a future where reconciliation, life, and healing, not sin, death, and suffering, will have the last word.

Author Philip Yancey tells about a time when he was asked to speak at a friend's funeral. He began by telling the congregation that he had been reflecting on a book by Rollo May titled *The Quest for Beauty*, in which May recalls some scenes from his lifelong search for beauty. One of his stops was Mount Athos, a peninsula of monasteries attached to Greece. According to Yancey:

One morning, Rollo May happened to stumble upon the celebration of Greek Orthodox Easter, the tail end of a church service that had been proceeding all night long. Incense hung in the air. The only light came from candles. And at the height of that service, the priest gave everyone present three Easter eggs, wonderfully decorated and wrapped in a veil. "*Christos Anesti!*" he said—"Christ is risen!" Each person there, including Rollo May, responded according to custom, "He is risen indeed!"

Rollo May writes, "I was seized then by a moment of spiritual reality: what would it mean for our world if he had truly risen?"

Yancey took May's question and asked the congregation to consider what it would be like for them, now bearing the weight of grief from their friend Bob's death, to walk out to the parking lot and find him alive "with his bounding walk, his crooked grin, and clear, grey eyes." As Yancey summarizes it:

That image gave me a hint of what Jesus' disciples felt on the first Easter. They, too, had grieved for three days. But on Sunday they caught a glimpse of something else, a startling clue to the riddle of the universe. Easter hits a new note, a note of hope and faith that what God did once in a graveyard in Jerusalem, he can and will repeat on a grand scale, for the world. For Bob. For us.⁵

Fear. Yes, it's there. Now granted, we still sing, "Because He lives / I can face tomorrow; / Because He lives / All fear is gone." But in reality, we're still growing into the truth of that chorus. So yes, fear, in some measure, is still there. But something else is there, something that's far greater, more comprehensive, and final. That something else is joy. Therefore we keep on singing, "Because I know He holds the future, / And life is worth the living just because He lives."

I want to close this sermon where we began, in Turkey, with Father Ilgit. As he closed his reflections on his country's suffering, he said:

Today, the tragedy is not behind us. We have a lot of work to do to rebuild! To rebuild—and not only buildings—we will have to gather our faithful scattered all over Turkey in search of a safe place, heal their wounds and keep them united in the hope that the earthquake will not have the last word. We know that the Lord is risen and that Easter is near!⁶

Whatever fear has been left behind by the earthquake, Father Ilgit's joy endures. The joy of those frightened women who hurried away from the tomb to tell the disciples. The joy of sometimes frightened followers like us, who move onward into the future, where Jesus meets us.

¹ "Antuan Ilgit: The Turkish Jesuit Who Lived Through the Earthquake." Jesuits. March 21, 2023. <https://www.jesuits.global/2023/03/21/antuan-ilgit-the-turkish-jesuit-who-lived-through-the-earthquake/> (April 5, 2023).

² Scott Black Johnston, "Empty." Day 1. April 9, 2023. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/641862c36615fba638000c8/scott-black-johnston-empty> (April 5, 2023).

³ William Willimon, *The Collected Sermons of William Willimon* (Louisville: John Knox, 2010) 242.

⁴ Melinda Quivik, Commentary on Matthew 28:1-10. Working Preacher. April 20, 2014. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-281-10-6> (April 5, 2023).

⁵ Philip Yancey, "The Great Reversal." *Christianity Today* (April 2000).

⁶ "Antuan Ilgit."