

SERMON
PLACES OF THE PASSION: SERMON SERIES
“The Garden Tomb”
Matthew 28:1-11

Two gas company workers were out checking meters in a neighborhood. They parked their truck at the end of the street and worked their way to the other end. At the last house a woman looking out her kitchen window watched the two men as they checked her gas meter. Finishing the meter check, the one worker challenged his coworker to a foot race down the street back to the truck.

As they came running up to the truck, they realized that the lady from the last house was huffing and puffing right behind them. They stopped and asked her what was wrong.

Gasping for breath, she answered, “When I see two gas men running full speed away from my house, I figure I had better run, too.”

Even though for most of us Easter is associated with great joy; filled with hallelujahs, flowers, ham dinners, music, and Easter bunnies; that first Easter morning, according to Matthew’s Gospel was filled with great fear. When the angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled aside the stone and sat upon it; Matthew tells us: “the guards shook with fear and fell into a dead faint.” Likewise, with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, they too must have been close to fainting from fear for the same angel tells them not to be frightened.

Reed Lessing of Creative Communications for the Parish says that his working definition for fear is False Evidence Appearing Real. Writing of that first Easter Lessing says of that fear; “*Jesus had been beaten barbarically, maimed mercilessly and buried haphazardly. His ministry ... was over. His movement ... finished. His cause ... done. All hope ... lost. Easter begins with great fear: false evidence appearing so very real.*”

As much as we try to deny it, fake it and hide from it; we all live in fear. Fear whispers incessantly, ‘There’s trouble out there!’ So, we don’t sleep well. We don’t whistle while we work. And if someone appears not to be phased by fear we give them that look. That look that questions their naivete. We scold them, “Haven’t you read the news and heard the reports and seen the studies? Airplanes fall out of the sky. Bull markets go bear. Terrorists terrorize. Mass shootings stop us in our tracks. Pandemics ravage the planet. I’m just waiting for the other shoe to drop; why aren’t you?”

Lessing further says of fear: “*it twists us into emotional pretzels, makes our eyes twitch, our blood pressure rise, our heads ache and our armpits sweat.*” Fear often times leaves us with a bitter aftertaste in our mouths; it’s the aftertaste of “what if?” What if I don’t close the sale on my house? What if I don’t get my stimulus check? What if she doesn’t love me?

I am reminded of the story that is told of the young man who was finally coming home after having served his country as a soldier in the Middle East. He called his parents from San Francisco; “Mom and Dad, I am coming home, but I’ve a favor to ask. I have a friend I’d like to bring home with me.”

“Sure,” his parents replied, “we’d love to meet him.”

“There’s something you should know,” the son continued, “he was hurt pretty badly in the fighting. He stepped on an IED and lost an arm and a leg. He has nowhere else to go, and I want him to come live with us.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, son. Maybe we can help him find somewhere to live?”

“No, Mom and Dad, I want him to live with us.”

“Son,” said the father, “you don’t know what you’re asking. Someone with such a handicap would be a terrible burden on us. We have our own lives to live, and we can’t let something like this interfere with our lives. I think you should just come home and forget about this guy. He’ll find a way to live on his own.”

At that point, the son hung up the phone. The parents heard nothing more from him. A few weeks later, however, they received a call from the San Francisco police. Their son had died after falling from a building, they were told. The police believed it was suicide. The grief-stricken parents flew to San Francisco and were taken to the city morgue to identify the body of their son.

They recognized him, but to their horror they also discovered something they didn’t know, their son had only one arm and one leg.

Fear convinces us that there is no hope, no promise, no chance, no life after death. It paralyzes us from being able to love... from being able to see a future when all we have is one arm and one leg.

But the good news of Easter is not about the fear that paralyzes; it's about the faith that enables us to see something different from the false evidence appearing real.

Do you remember what the angel said to the women who came to Jesus' grave? "Don't be frightened! I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified, but he isn't here! For he has come back to life again, just as he said he would."

The women wonder: *Where is Jesus?* The angel answers: He is not here.

The woman wonder: Why Jesus is not here? The angel answers: He has been raised.

This angel provides the answer to our biggest question. Following the loss of loved ones, he tells us that they are not trapped in graves; they have been raised. On Easter morning, we discover that the solution to death is not found in some new technology or latest gimmick; but instead, it is discovered in an empty tomb. It's what Homiletics calls "the resurrection solution."

The proof of the resurrection, says Homiletics, "*is an empty tomb.*" The proof that Jesus is not dead, "*is that he is not there.*"

So, if he is not there then, where is he?

Easter not only answers the death question, but it answers the life question as well. In the seventh verse of our scripture text from Matthew's Gospel the angel says to the women, "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.'"

William C. Pender, of the First Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, says that not only are the women charged with the task of telling the disciples that Jesus is ahead of them; but that they are charged with the task of telling us that "*Jesus is going ahead of us, always ahead of us. Therefore, we have nothing to fear.*"

Reed Lessing points out that in Matthew's Gospel Jesus, prior to his death, told his disciples five times that he would rise from the dead. Five times Jesus said, "I must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, be killed, and on the third day be raised." Five times Jesus assured them of what was coming. "Still," says Lessing, "the disciples chose fear over faith! They abandoned Jesus on Thursday. Only one stands at the cross on Friday. And on Sunday they all hide behind locked doors because they were afraid." Are we any different? It's so easy to choose fear [FALSE EVIDENCE APPEARING REAL] over faith, is it not?

In 1960 an amazing thing happened in a tiny village in the Ukraine. Grisha Siklenko, who had been feared dead ever since World War II, suddenly walked into town. It turns out that the night he marched away to war, he went home where his mother had made a hiding place for him under a manure pile. And so, for 18 years he lived in manure. In the winters, he nearly froze to death. In the summers, he nearly suffocated to death. Finally, in 1960, Grisha walked out of the manure pile expecting to be prosecuted, punished and placed in prison for desertion. His fears were groundless; the statute of limitations and long since expired.

Lessing says that while fear makes us live in manure piles; faith makes us live into the future that God has prepared for us. That future, according to Matthew, has two permanently conjoined trajectories...two trajectories that cannot be separated. First, it's a promise that *Jesus will meet us in the mission of the church* when we follow his guidance and do his work in the world. Just three chapters earlier in Matthew, Jesus said, "Come ... inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Homiletics says of this trajectory: "*When we care for the least of the brothers and sisters of Jesus, we are caring for him. Jesus meets us in this world whenever we follow his guidance and do his work. Our own lives are improved when we look beyond ourselves to the needs of others.*"

And second, it's a promise of *a future in Christ's heavenly kingdom*. When Jesus encounters the women on the road, he demonstrates that life does not end at the tomb, but it continues with joy and clarity and restored relationship. He greets them joyfully, tells them not to be afraid and lets them touch his feet to prove that he is not a ghost. Jesus clarifies their mission with the command to "go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. He promises to meet the disciples there, and to restore the relationships that had been broken when "all the disciples deserted him and fled." Homiletics says of these words of Jesus: "*they set the stage for heaven, a place of joy*

and clarity and restored relationship. In heaven, our tears will be replaced by laughter. Our confusion will be clarified. Our shattered relationships will be healed by forgiveness and reconciliation.”

Rarely does Easter and April’s Fool fall on the same day. The last time it did was in 2018. The time before that was 1956. The next time will be in 2029. On Easter Sunday 2018, the associate pastor at a church gathered the children in the front of the sanctuary during the morning service for the Children’s Message. The pastor did a big buildup, reciting some of the events that happened on that first Easter, including of course, Jesus’ resurrection. She finished her recitation of the facts with “And there Jesus stood!” She then asked the children, “What do you suppose Jesus said to Mary?” At that, one preschool-aged girl shouted, “It’s April Fools’ Day!”

Matthew’s Gospel assures us that Easter is no joke. The experiences of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary teach us that the dead will not be trapped in tombs, but instead they will be raised. We now know that Jesus goes ahead of us; that resurrection life answers not only our questions about death, but our questions about life. Through the resurrection of Jesus, we are given the promise of a marvelous future, both in this life and the next.