Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: “Against the Grain” Lent and Holy Week Series
Sermon Title: “Afraid, yet filled with joy”
Sermon Text: Matthew 28:1-10

Listener’s Journey: I want my listener to see the death and resurrection of Jesus as God’s timeless pattern to transcend the effects of fear, awaken to love, and to spread God’s limitless joy.

Unique Quotes from Sermon:

Today, on this virtual Easter Sunday, we celebrate with hundreds of millions of people around the world the most important of all Christian remembrances because, as the Apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to the Early Church in the Roman province of Corinth, “if Christ has not been raised from the dead our faith is useless and we are to be pitied among all people.” Easter is the pinnacle of this week and all of the days and events leading up to the first Easter are critically important to relive as well. They are important because, like the life, death, and renewal of the fruit of the Crabtree and all living things, the events of the first Holy Week invite us to relive the exuberant joyfulness, the profound disappointments, and the surprise turn of events such that they awaken us to God’s ongoing renewal in all things, including our own individual lives and during a time of global pandemic.

The Pandemic has felt to many, like a profound reset with life on the other side of this point in time never being the same as life before this moment. The first Easter was a moment reset as well. To that point, in Jesus’ religion and elsewhere, it was the norm to pay back eye-for-eye-tooth-for-tooth, shed blood for the forgiveness of sins, and pay religious leaders to do certain actions and rituals in order to be reconciled to God. The resurrection of Jesus marked a new epicenter and pivot in human history. No more retribution. No more shedding of blood. No money for forgiveness. Reconciliation with God is through faith alone. Grace and love are the new law. And, compassion, mercy and justice are the new ethic. The “resurrection reset” has real and day to day implications for Christ followers because, as we see in today’s Scripture and all of the final chapter of Matthew’s biography of Jesus—those who believed in the resurrection and considered themselves followers of Jesus were instructed to teach and embody all that Jesus taught. That is an immensely difficult task because we live in a world of good and evil that is scary at times. Fear holds us back from taking the kinds of risk necessary to love everyone including our enemies. Fear holds us back from standing against the injustices of our world. Jesus and the events of the first Easter help curb our fears and infuse us with courage and surprisingly—joy.

The resurrection of Jesus was recorded in all four gospel biographies (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) each with slightly different points of emphasis. Matthew’s account included an emphasis on the theme of fear. Matthew noted that the tomb guards were so afraid that “they shook and became like dead men.” When the two women disciples (both named Mary) arrived very early in the morning they encountered an angel and (because seeing an angel is highly unconventional) the very first thing the angel said was, “do not be afraid.” Matthew recounted that the women hurried away from the tomb “afraid yet filled with joy” and as they ran to tell the others, suddenly Jesus appeared to them, and the first thing he said was, “do not be afraid...” On this Easter, while facing a global pandemic two thousand years after the angel and Jesus said, “do not be afraid”—our hearts still burn with wonder and anticipation as we think about and embody the reality of Christ’s resurrection, and hear those words again today—Do. Not. Be. Afraid. And, like the reality of the women, we take that advice, mix it up with a very natural response of fear and yet see a deeper invitation than a fear response. Our invitation is to see the death and resurrection of Jesus as God’s timeless pattern that gives us the means to transcend the effects of fear, awaken to love, and to spread God’s limitless joy.

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1 1 Corinthians 15:14.
2 Matthew 28:4.
3 Matthew 28:5.
4 Matthew 28:8-10.
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The women of the first Easter were afraid when seeing an angel and a risen Christ. For certain, they were the most courageous of those following Jesus and still, they were afraid. It was the women disciples who stayed with Jesus through the entirety of his suffering, crucifixion and death. Everyone else either hid, fled, or denied knowing Jesus, for fear they would be captured and killed with Jesus. How did the women have the courage to do, what so few others were willing to do? What gave them the courage to transcend or go beyond the effects of fear in their lives? Well, for one, they were women! Historically, men have gotten a lot of airtime in the Easter narrative. I am drawn to the women in the Easter narrative because of both how the Gospel biographers consistently mention them, and the role that women have played since the origins of the human experience. Since the beginning of there even being what we call “women” and “men,” it has been women alone who have endured the strains of birthing. For thousands of years it has been women who have navigated societies around the globe with their rights and standing stripped away by oppressive societies and systems. And, even today women continue to face unthinkable physical abuse at the hands of men. And yet, consistently women prove to be courageous and resilient in the face of oppression and fear.

The women who followed Jesus around the events of the first Easter were prime examples of such resilience. And, they transcended the effects of their fear largely because of their expansive love of Christ and others. Most expressly in their actions. Gospel biographer Luke tells us that they moved with Jesus every step of the passion week and, were the first to be at the tomb on Easter Sunday to administer the spices they had prepared for Jesus' body.⁵ Despite the horrific crucifixion and intimidating presence of Roman guards the women always stayed close to Jesus for the purpose of solidarity and to be an attending presence. There was little they could solve or change about the circumstances around them. And, they were engulfed in fear just as every Christ follower was in the chaos of the first Holy Week. Yet, the women were not immobilized by their fear. They were compelled to be present and attending by the force of their nurturing love.

Oh, how much all of humanity needs to embrace the qualities that these women exhibited on that first Easter. And, it speaks to all of us right now, in a moment when so much is out of our control. In our day to day lives most of us are asking questions such as “How many more people are going to die?” “Is someone I love going to die?” “Will I die?” and even “How much longer will we have to live like this?” We can’t help but feel sequestered physically, emotionally, and quite possibly spiritually as well. Western culture and American life have taught us that being in control of our job, finances and personal destiny are nearly unquestionable rights and attainable moral values. Yet, no such aspirations are a match for the reality that, as one publication put it, “all data is incomplete and all conclusions are subject to change.”⁶ Beloved friends, we are not in control.

Strangely, admitting that fact, and constantly reminded ourselves of that fact, is a starting point for living life that transcend the effects of fear. Doing so makes us available to the power of love. The women of the first Easter showed us how to do this. They were “afraid yet filled with joy” because they gave themselves to the idea that everything was ultimately out of their control and free from needing to control, they let themselves be awakened and compelled by love.

Three Discussion Questions:
1. What does Easter meant to you? (past experiences, questions, positive and negative) (Personal sharing)
2. Matthew engages the idea of fear in his text. How is the fear of the guards contrasted with the fear of the women? (Exploring the text)
3. How do you struggle with fear? How have you awakened to the love of Christ over your lifetime? (Direct application)

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⁵ Luke 24:1
⁶ https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/fog-pandemic/608764/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=masthead-newsletter&utm_content=20200404&silverid=NDU3MjQ0NDU2MDQyS0 (Accessed 4-4-20)