

# Sermon

Easter Sunday | Matthew 28:1-10 | Peter Lane

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Good Morning! What a joy to have you all here on this beautiful day. Welcome. Right off the top, here, can we resolve together to have courage in the face of fear, a courage to act out of love for one another? Doing so would put us on a road where we would see the risen Jesus. Come on. Let us resolve to have the courage to act out love in the face of fear. Courageously open to the future, love will meet us.

It is a great task to which to dedicate ourselves. Jesus did not die in vain because his followers resolved to courageously act out of love for each other and all of humanity, resolved to courageously have faith in God and in life itself, resolved courageously to proclaim to the world that we do not have to be afraid. And when they acted that way, they saw Jesus. Acting that way, the transcendent impinged on the ordinary. God met them in their fear and brought great joy. God will meet us in our fear and will bring great joy.

It is always good, when trying to do something difficult, to have exemplars. Matthew gives us two courageous, loving exemplars: Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. So, let's get into it. First, we will look at our Gospel text. Second, we will consider the fears we face. Third, we will explore what courage looks like. And I will conclude by claiming that on the road of courage we will see the abundant love of Jesus.

## The Bible

I love this Gospel story from Matthew. It is told without taking a breath. Suddenly, Quickly, Suddenly. Its mood is tense: twice it uses the word fear and twice it instructs "Do not be afraid." It's short, barely 200 words to narrate the resurrection after spending seven chapters on the rest of Holy Week. And it messes with time. When the Marys show up the resurrection has already happened even though the stone still seals the tomb and nobody knows; the guards had not even noticed. And the bodily Jesus only shows up at the end, away from the tomb. It's a great passage and it features two exemplars of courage.

Mary Magdalene and other Mary. We don't meet these two in Matthew until the crucifixion scene. Only then do we learn that they are among the women from Galilee who had provided for

Jesus and that they were watching the execution from a distance. But once they show up in the story, they refuse to leave. The two Marys accompany Joseph of Arimathea to his tomb where Jesus is buried. And then they wake up early Sunday to go back and see the tomb. Note that Matthew says nothing about bringing spices or anything. The two Marys just go to watch, to observe, to hold vigil. Their devotion is clear. And fear. There is plenty for the two Marys to be afraid of. They just watched their friend get crucified and they saw the horrible power of the apparatus of the state. Then an angel that looked like lightning, was terribly strong, knew their thoughts, and yet was casual enough to sit before speaking to them, broke in on their silence. Scary. Plenty to fear.

And yet, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary show incredible courage. For a start, they show up. Better than any of the men. And, they immediately follow the angels instructions. They keep being told to not be afraid. And while I am sure they are very afraid, they don't act out of that fear. Courage is not the opposite of fear. Their previous devotion has prepared them so that upon hearing the good news they can add great joy to their fear. When Jesus shows up out of nowhere they immediately respond in love and worship, taking hold of Jesus' feet. It draws my mind back to the woman at Bethany with her alabaster jar of very costly ointment and her profligate washing of Jesus. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary act with courage in the face of fear, a courage that leads them to act out of love for others. It puts them on a road where they do see Jesus.

## Plenty to Fear

Like the two Marys our task is to not act out of fear. Like the two Marys, we have plenty to fear. As a community, Gun Violence in Chicago and growing tensions on the Korean Peninsula. As individuals, loneliness, the pain of injustice, the betrayal of a friend. And as Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson put it in a column about Good Friday. "[T]here are the unspeakable things – the death of a child, the diagnosis of an aggressive cancer, the steady advance of a disease that will take our minds and dignity. ...And given the example of Christ, we are permitted to feel God-forsaken." In the silences of our own lives

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it can seem that the tomb is still sealed shut by a large stone. It is in those moments that we can remember our resolution, to act with courage in the face of fear, a courage to act out of love. Jesus will meet us there. Jesus met the two Marys just beyond the burial site. Jesus promises that the disciples will see him if they go to Galilee. The Love of God that Jesus embodied waits to meet us when we act with courage in the face of fear.

## Courage

Trying to think of examples of courage, Alexander Hamilton sprung to mind. At the very beginning of the awesome musical of the same name, Hamilton meets Aaron Burr and says to him, "You're an orphan. Of course! I'm an orphan. God, I wish there was a war! Then we could prove that we're worth more than anyone bargained for..." Hamilton is so ready to act out of courage, he is seeking fear. Burr gives him good advice, "Talk less. Smile more."

I also thought of Cora, the main character in Colson Whitehead's novel "The Underground Railroad." She did not have to wish there was a war. Cora remarkably runs away from slavery and from many other terribly fearful things. It was only this week that I realized what her name means. Cora from the French Couer, for heart, the root word of courage. The book is unflinching in its portrayal of what evil humans are capable of - crucifixions abound. And the book offers hope that with courage and faith in life, one might know new life.

A final example of potent courage in the face of fear is the poet Robert Lowell, who struggled mightily with Manic Depressive Illness his whole life. Lowell was hospitalized over and over again. How did he manage wholehearted life in the midst of all of it? In her fascinating recent book about Lowell and his illness, Kay Redfield Jamison contends that it was Lowell's courage that allowed him to keep at life despite all of the challenges. She says about Robert Lowell, "Within the broken world of war, out of its chaos, courage could emerge." Lowell wrote in his poem, "Return in March," "Our hope is in things that spring." "Tannish buds and green buds, hidden yesterday, pioneers today."

Courage reveals our deepest loves. Is that not true of the two Marys, whose devotion to Jesus took them to the crucifixion and the burial and the sealed tomb? Courage revealed their true hearts. I think it is also true of Hamilton and Cora and Lowell. And I think our deepest loves, our true hearts will be revealed in courageous action too. In the face of fear, we will have courageous love for one another.

## The Love of God

On this beautiful day, when we dress in our best, eat our finest, and drink to our many blessings, let us resolve to have courage to act out of love in the face of fear. And the great, good news is that God will meet us on the road. If we are courageously open to love, love will meet us.

Happy Easter. Amen.

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