

“Do Not Be Afraid”  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
Based on Matthew 28: 1-10  
Longview Presbyterian Church  
Easter Sunday—April 24, 2011

Some of you might be familiar with “Willow Tree,” a line of figurines, usually angels. I was given these as an ordination present. Not technically angels, these figurines representing Love, Joy and Peace sit on my office bookshelves, flanked by books. A couple weeks ago, I discovered a problem. Some books had fallen over, knocking down the figurines. Actually, what happened exactly was, my books on death, dying, suffering and grieving fell over, knocking down Joy (I’m not making this up) who crashed into Love, who then hit Peace and you would *think* that Peace would have simply and safely fallen against and be propped up by the book *Healing for a Broken World* but in fact, Peace toppled over tumbling all the way down to the floor. Isn’t that a lot like life? The first casualty of death and dying is Joy. Whether real or imagined, we sense that Love, too, is somehow lost, or at least diminished. And of course, Peace, in our hearts and in our minds, doesn’t have a chance. And when love, peace and joy are gone, healing the broken world can seem like little more than a nice idea collecting dust on a bookshelf.

I suspect that’s a bit how the women felt that morning, approaching the tomb at dawn. Surely, in the wake of the death of Jesus the joy they had felt a week before—as Jesus made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem greeted by shouts of “Hosanna” and “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”—surely that joy felt like an emotion they’d felt a lifetime ago, as if it had been experienced by someone else altogether. Surely their grief consumed their entire being leaving no room for any other emotion. Perhaps it seemed like all the love in the world, too, had somehow been sucked out of the world. With Jesus, their hoped for Messiah dead, any hope for peace and for healing of the broken world had been toppled. Crashed. As lifeless as Jesus himself.

In some ways, it’s hard to put ourselves in the shoes of these women. Roughly 2000 later, we know the Easter story. Most of us have been hearing it at least once a year, every year of our lives. But of course, that first Easter, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary didn’t know what we know. All they knew was that two days before, they lost more than just a dear friend. They lost more than just a spiritual leader. They lost their hopes and dreams for a transformed reality.

As the women approached the tomb “suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.” The earth shakes and the angel appears, out of fear, the guards “shook and became like dead men.” I can’t help but get a little bit of a kick out of this. The presumably big burly guards faint out of fear, but the women are fine. Sure, they’re undoubtedly pretty frightened, too, but they don’t *faint*. After all they’ve gone through in the last few days, including seeing their dear friend, teacher and

hoped for Messiah die a gruesome death on a cross, perhaps they are in shock, or perhaps they have built up some kind of immunity.

“Do not be afraid,” are the angel’s first words to the women. And we remember from the Christmas story that the angel Gabriel has the same words of comfort for Mary when he tells her she will bear the Son of God. Later, the angels appearing to the shepherds to proclaim Jesus’ birth also say, “Do not be afraid.” In our time, angels have been so domesticated in artistic representations that imagine a glorious, beautiful angelic being or a baby-faced cherub and it might be a little difficult to imagine being frightened. Awed, maybe. But not frightened. However, clearly, these heavenly creatures were as terrifying to those who met them as a 12 foot green alien from outer space would be to us.

When the angel appears accompanied by an earthquake, rolls away the stone covering the entrance to the tomb and nonchalantly sits on top of it, telling them, “Do not be afraid,” I can’t help but wonder just how comforting those words are. The angel’s full message is, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then 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.’” As one commentator asks, “Is it reassuring to find out that not only has the earth been shaking; it has been so shaken that the dead have been stirred back to life?”<sup>1</sup>

And the women *do* leave. With “fear and great joy.” There’s an urgency mixed with fear and excitement that 2000 years later is difficult to grasp. Have you ever felt fear and great joy? I don’t recall that I have... “So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’” The women take off with fear and great joy, heading back to tell the others when—suddenly—they see the only thing that could be more amazing, more unbelievable than what has already happened. “Suddenly Jesus met them.” The word translated “suddenly” might better be translated “look here!” “So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Look here! Jesus met them...” And Jesus’ first word to them, “greetings!” also has a connotation of “rejoice!” “Rejoice!” is all he says at first and instantly they know him and they fall at his feet and worship him. And then Jesus, also, says, “do not be afraid.”

Rev. Martin Copenhauer, recalls that the last time someone told him “do not be afraid” with any real authority, enough authority that he really, deeply believed that there was nothing to fear was when he was a child hearing it from his parents. But he notes, “For adults, the fears can be more complex and words of reassurance harder to come by. As we get older, we cannot escape the realization that, in Ernest Hemingway’s phrase, ‘life breaks everyone’ at some time or another or, at the very least, wears one down relentlessly. As adults, we live with an increasing sense that death is greedy, eventually

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<sup>1</sup>Richard S. Dietrich, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 349.

claiming everyone we love. When grown-up fears are stirred by such enormous realities, it can seem as if words of reassurance are nowhere to be found.”<sup>2</sup>

When an angel tells you “fear not,” that’s a pretty good authority. You probably take some assurance from those words. When Jesus, the resurrected Christ tells you “fear not,” I imagine there’s not much more you could hope for. I can’t imagine there would be anything more comforting, more re-assuring than that. But this is no “there, there everything will be ok,” kind of assurance. This is no ready made platitude Jesus is serving up. Indeed, as Copenhauer explains, “When Jesus says, ‘Fear not,’ it is not assurance that nothing can go wrong, because often things do go wrong. It is not assurance that everything turns out for the best, because, if we are honest about it, it seldom does. Rather, it is assurance that, whatever may happen to us, whatever a day may hold, God has the power to strengthen us and uphold us; that whatever we must face, we do not face it alone; that nothing we encounter is stronger than God’s love; that ultimately God gets the last word; that in the end—and sometimes even before the end—God’s love is triumphant.”<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, we sit in the dark, as the women and the other disciples did in the hours between Jesus’ death and the Easter morning discovery that Christ is Risen. We sit, assured in faith that God has won the victory over sin and death. As one of our choral anthems this morning states, “sin and death can vex no more.” But the problem is: sin and death *do* continue to “vex” to put it mildly. They do much more than vex. They cause great pain and suffering in our lives. No one gets off easy. We are all “vexed” by sin and death. And this reality is something that has always disturbed me. How is it that Christ’s resurrection means the end of sin and death when, it’s no secret, sin and death are still very much a part of our world?

I recently came across the best explanation of this paradox of our faith that I’ve ever heard. In our Monday Kerygma Bible study the analogy was used that in WWII, once the Allies secured a beachhead on the European continent, victory over the Nazis was assured. Though the war would rage on for months, the outcome had been determined.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has won the decisive battle over death and sin, though the war continues in this in-between time, until God’s Reign has broken through completely. Until God’s Reign *is* the new reality.

When the Marys arrive at the tomb at dawn, they find that the tomb is already empty. Already, Christ is Risen. This means that God was working before dawn. God was at work in the dark. When the women and the other disciples were still steeped in the dark of their grief, already God was doing the work of Resurrection. Already God was giving them reason to “fear not.”

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<sup>2</sup> Martin B. Copenhauer, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 348.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 348, 350.

<sup>4</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks to You*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 141.

Before meeting Jesus, the women were in “fear and great joy” But when Jesus assures them, comforts them and relieves their fear, what is left? “What is left when their fears are gone? Great joy!”<sup>5</sup>

God has won the decisive triumph over death and sin. Death and sin are put in their place. Joy is again possible, and indeed the most appropriate response. Love again has a place, front and center. Peace, utterly dependent on the love of God, the peace that surpasses all understanding, is put aright. And healing for a broken world is again possible through God in whom all things are possible.

Do not be afraid.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard S. Dietrich, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 351.