

**“Do Not Be Afraid”**  
**Matthew 28:1-15; Isaiah 25:6-9**

Yesterday, my wife told me she loved me. Now, that is not the first time she said it. She likely said it the day before in addition to thousands of other times. And yet, it remains a miraculous statement. Because I can be a real pain.

For instance, when it comes to eating out, I always want to go to the Pita House, except on Saturday when we eat barbeque.

And when my Kentucky Wildcats are losing, I can yell things at the television that make the dog hide under the desk. And this past year, there was a lot of yelling.

And I wouldn't say I'm a perfectionist, actually more obsessive-compulsive. I expect things to work correctly, and when they don't, I am unhappy. See the shadows on the cross. I know the construction guys slipped the lift out while I was at lunch so I couldn't make them go up and adjust those lights one more time.

And I like things neat and in order. I was made to be a Presbyterian, demonstrating that phrase in our Book of Order that says Presbyterians do things “decently and in order.”

Of course, the word decently doesn't really describe me. It should probably read frantically and in order. In my study, I expect my books to be in their designated places. I expect my desk to be arranged in a particular manner and uncluttered. The other pastors, who do not share my uncluttered neurosis, close their study doors when they see me coming.

And, I am not a patient driver. It is not that I do not let people out in traffic or always wave thanks when someone lets me out; but rather, I expect people to drive appropriately. I am unhappy when slower drivers remain in the left hand lane instead of moving to the right, especially if they have a cell phone stuck to their ear. And I have been known to express my displeasure to the person accompanying me, which may be why the dog won't get in the car with me.

So, as you can see, no more flawed, undeserving person ever lived on the planet. So, it is news when my wife says she loves me because she surely possesses a lot of reasons not to love me. Her statement may not be new “news,” but it is surely good news.

And that defines Easter, not new news, but good news.

I am going to be honest. On this Easter when so many of you are here, when we are reopening this beautiful sanctuary, I want to wow you with my theological insights. I want to tell you things you have never heard before. I want you to have a religious experience like you have never had before. But I can't accomplish that. After almost 2000 years of Christian history, my Easter sermon is about the gazillionth ever preached. There is nothing new to say and there is no new way to say it. The words spoken to the women that morning remain the only words to be remembered and repeated, “He has been raised.” After almost two

thousand years, these words are not new news, but are miraculously still “good news.”

Our story this morning from Matthew is one familiar to all of us. Yet, each of the four gospel writers provides their own unique elements and interpretations. Jesus is crucified and buried on Friday. Early on Sunday morning Mary and Mary Magdalene come to his tomb. Likely, they have approached to pay their respects since anointing his body would be prohibited by the closed entrance to the tomb.

Matthew often notes that great theological events are accompanied by physical manifestations. Here, he tells us an earthquake coincides with the women’s arrival and an angel appears. The angel rolls back the stone and takes a seat on it. A dazzling figure, seeing him the guards become so fearful that they faint. But the angel addresses the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus. 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 will meet them in Galilee.”

Verse eight says they “left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.” But, suddenly, Jesus stands before them. “Greetings!” he says. Immediately, they approach, falling at his feet, holding and worshipping him. Then he says to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Then, likely voicing the religious tensions of his day, Matthew relates how the local authorities bribed the tomb guards to say the disciples stole Jesus’ body. He notes that it was a story still told in his time, and we could add, still reiterated by some in our time.

Two young boys were spending the night with their grandparents the week before Christmas. At bedtime, the two boys knelt beside their beds to say their prayers when the youngest one began praying at the top of his lungs. “I PRAY FOR A NEW BICYCLE...I PRAY FOR A NEW WII...I PRAY FOR A NEW BASEBALL GLOVE...” The older brother leaned over and nudged the younger brother and said, “Why are you shouting your prayers? God isn’t deaf.” To which the little brother replied, “I know, but Grandma is!”

The miracle of Christ’s resurrection is God’s way of shouting at us, “I love you. I forgive you. And one day, I will welcome you home.”

This morning, we gather as Christians have for almost 2000 years to hear the story, recall the event that defines us and empowers us. Why is the resurrection though not new news still good news? Because Jesus’ words to the two Marys remain his words to you and me: “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers...they will see me.”

“Do not be afraid.” These are the exact same words the angel spoke to the women, and here Jesus repeats them. Now, I have to tell you, if I had been there, I would have been afraid. And verse eight says the women were very much afraid.

So, why were the women afraid? The angel has just told them Jesus has been raised from the dead.

I think the women were afraid for the same reason you and I are; we don't understand or don't believe what the resurrection proclaims. The resurrection signifies that our hope for the future is grounded in the love and power of Almighty God. Whether it is disease, the economic crisis, or death, we perceive that we are out here on our own, struggling against principalities and powers over which we possess no control or influence. But, the resurrection continuously reminds us that is not true. God has not, and will not, forget us. God did not abandon Jesus, and God will not abandon us.

The women were told not to be afraid because Jesus' resurrection made everything right. Good triumphed over evil. Truth defeated falsehood. Life surpassed death. Jesus makes it possible for us to live unafraid.

And, that is not a superficial alleviation of fear. We still may be afraid of snakes, of our 401(k) spiraling downward, or of choosing the wrong prom dress. But these are not the things that drove the women's fear, or ours. The women feared that their direction in life, their reason for living, their Messiah had been killed. Which meant their very purpose in life had been extinguished. The angel, and Jesus, told them not to be afraid because life, the future, eternity had been determined by Jesus being raised from the dead.

The resurrection authenticates Jesus, stamps as true Jesus' words and actions, Jesus' instructions to each one of us. The resurrection affirms Jesus' declaration that love, forgiveness, and service to others is God's very will and desire. The resurrection does not mean there will not be elements of life that frighten us. But the resurrection boldly proclaims they will not defeat us. Our purpose, our hope, our eternal life is made certain by Jesus' resurrection, and the promise of our resurrection. And that is why we are not afraid.

In Germany, as late as the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Lutheran pastors would begin their sermons on Easter Day with a joke. The custom even had a Latin title: It was called *risus paschalis* — “the paschal joke.” In a tradition of Protestantism not exactly given to hilarity, the thought of a Lutheran pastor climbing into his pulpit, fiddling nervously with his starched ruff, and saying to his assembled congregation, “Have you heard the one about...” or, “A funny thing happened to me on the way to the Bundestag this morning...” is somewhat bizarre.

Why a joke? Because in the Lutheran tradition, the empty tomb and resurrection are seen as God's great joke on the world. We laugh and sing because that is what God is doing today in raising Jesus from the dead.

This morning, we are not afraid, because God's joke on the world is our hope of salvation both in this life and in the world to come.

“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers...they will see me.”

“my brothers” This is a very interesting designation to employ for eleven men who ran away when they arrested you. Jesus calls “my brothers” the very

men who had spent three years as his disciples, listening to his words, eating meal after meal together, sharing their resources. But when things got rough, they scattered like the wind. Peter, James, and John can't keep awake in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter denies him three times. They don't even show up for the crucifixion. Jesus endures his agony, pain, and death without their support or aid. It is his women followers who sit at the foot of the cross and come to the tomb on Sunday. The men are either in hiding or choose to believe that Jesus is dead and gone.

Yet, the resurrected Jesus says to the two Marys, "Tell my brothers..." Tell my brothers, those men who abandoned me, those men who swore their devotion to me and then disappeared, those men who said they would die with me and then ran away, tell them, "my brothers," I will see them in Galilee.

These two words, "my brothers," exemplify and explain why the resurrection is good news. Those eleven disciples did not deserve Jesus' love or forgiveness. They did not deserve to see him. They did not deserve a second, third, or one hundredth chance. They had done absolutely nothing that Jesus should reach out his hand to bring them back into his fold. And yet, Jesus calls them "my brothers," extending his promise of forgiveness and hope.

The resurrection is good news because not a single one of us in this sanctuary deserves Jesus' love and forgiveness. We have fallen asleep when we should have been praying, watching that the justice, mercy, and love of Christ is lived out in our small part of the world. We have run whenever it looked like the faith would cost us something. We have hidden our face when asked to be bold in following Jesus.

And that is why the resurrection remains so central in our faith and lives. Just like with those disciples, Jesus promises to once again meet us. Jesus forgave those eleven men of their abandonment of him, their fear, their lack of faith and belief. And this morning, we come to be forgiven of our fear of commitment, our abandonment of Christ's call, our lack of faith and belief in Christ's power to resurrect our personalities in this life, and our bodies in the next. The resurrection confirms that God will welcome his wayward children back as brothers and sisters.

With the internet, having the correct Web address is everything. And, it can be important to have the right "address" in reading the Bible, as well. Nowhere is this more true than the old story about the woman who ordered a wedding cake for her daughter, instructing the baker to decorate it with the words of I John 4:18: "Perfect love casts out fear." Something got lost in translation, however, and the baker looked up John 4:18 instead. And so, the wedding cake was decorated with these words: "You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband."

It is so easy to pick out the wrong verse in the resurrection story. We can become enamored with the words denoting angels, earthquakes, and rolled away stones. But what is important is that the resurrected Christ searches out, welcomes

back those who abandoned him. What is important is that the resurrection affirms that the one who conquered sin and death welcomes back you and me.

“Do not be afraid”

There is much in life to fear. We can only overcome that fear if we believe in the resurrection. And the resurrection is only believable because God is believable. The truth of Christ’s resurrection confirms that God continues to rule the world, that the last word of existence is not hatred, evil, and death but love, justice and life. We can still be afraid at times, but belief reminds us of a certain outcome.

This morning, hear, believe, accept the words Jesus spoke for you and me almost two thousand years ago — words that are no longer new news, yet remain good news. “Do not be afraid; tell my brothers and sisters, all those gathered at Westminster Presbyterian Church this Easter Sunday that they will see me.”

For he is risen. He is risen indeed.

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April 12, 2009