

Don't Be Afraid
April 16, 2017—Resurrection of Our Lord
Matthew 28:1-10

I was sitting on our recliner love seat, cup of coffee on the end table, eyes closed, trying to slide into a slow day off. I wasn't really awake yet.

So, when, on September third, 2016, my feet began to sway back and forth on their own, I was confused. Then I thought to myself, "I wonder if this is what it's like to have a stroke."

Then I heard the cups rattle in the cupboard, and I knew. This was...an earthquake! Fortunately for us, it was a small shaker, 5.6 on the standard scale. But it was strong enough to sway mirrors in Omaha, to tip furniture in Lincoln, and to damage buildings in Oklahoma.

For me, it changed how I see this part of the world. In my historian's head, I knew about the New Madrid fault, the great earthquake of 1812, and the mighty Mississippi flowing backwards for a time.

But on that September Saturday, history came close to reality. The world wasn't quite so stable under my feet.

Matthew's Sunday story is the only to mention the Easter earthquake. As the two Mary's made their way to the tomb, the ground under their feet shook.

The great stone that sealed the entrance was rolled away. A divine messenger sat on the stone, admiring a morning's handiwork. The posted guards also shook—not from seismic shocks but from sheer panic.

In the midst of these spectacular signs, the messenger said the oddest thing. "Don't be afraid." Don't be afraid? Good luck on that, buddy!

It's a message we'd all like to believe. Don't be afraid. Good luck on that one.

North Korea plops a ballistic missile in the Sea of Japan. An anti-Christian terrorist blows himself up during an Egyptian Palm Sunday mass. Bashar Assad gasses his own people—again. The United States sends in the cruise missiles. There's another school shooting. And that's the short list for today.

Don't be afraid. Good luck on that one, buddy!

So why this counsel of courage in the face of quakes and confusion? "*I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified,*" the messenger says.

Now comes the real earthquake. Wait for it... "*He is not here,*" he tells the women, "*for he has been raised as he said.*"

Just sit with that for a minute—"for he has been raised as he said." After that September earthquake, the peaceful Loess hills don't look quite as stable to me. But that's small potatoes here. After the Easter earthquake, the entire universe has been changed.

Don't be afraid. Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!).

Fear of death is the root of every other fear. What if that's really the end? What if it's all just a cosmic game—"full of sound and fury," as Shakespeare says, "signifying nothing"? What if life is just a long, slow losing battle against entropy? And then comes...nothing? What if death...wins?

That's the power of death. And we use it to scare each other into submission. But what if death has no power? That's the good news of Easter. In Romans six, verses nine and ten, Paul says, "*We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.*" Death has lost its power to paralyze us.

So, Paul says, think like Resurrection people! *“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin,”* Paul concludes in Romans six, verse eleven, *“dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”*

Don’t be afraid. Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!).

Resurrection joy is for everyone everywhere. In Acts ten, Peter preaches a little Easter sermon. It’s not clear in the reading who the audience is. Peter is preaching to a Roman centurion, an unclean outsider, a member of the army of occupation.

Cornelius, the centurion, has received a vision about Peter and this good news. Moments after Peter’s sermon, the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and everyone in his household. They are baptized into the new life in Jesus.

Dirty, rotten, stinking scoundrels and their families—Easter joy is for them as well. Jesus changes lives and hearts, no matter who you are or where you’ve been.

Here at Emanuel, we have the privilege of walking alongside people who have journeyed from death to life.

For some that has been a literal journey through illness to healing.

For others it has been a journey from a troubled past to a joy-filled present.

For others it has been a journey through the shadowed valley of grief into the brighter fields of resurrection.

For us as a congregation it has been a journey from the edge of despair to bright days of hope. That’s the power of Easter joy. It is the antidote for fear.

Don’t be afraid. Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!).

You see, Joy is the treatment for the disease called fear.

Fear paralyzes our thinking. Fear narrows our vision. Fear constricts our options. Fear chokes our creativity. Fear makes us cautious, suspicious, cynical and tribal.

Fear is the favored weapon of the Evil One. And we are so willing to cooperate.

But not today! Not today when we shout the words of joy.

Today we can be people of courage.

Today we can be people of vision.

Today we can embrace the adventure of faith.

Today we can love with wild abandon.

Today we can embrace the stranger, welcome the refugee, love the enemy.

The Easter earthquake changes everything!

Don’t be afraid. Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!).

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