

San Lorenzo Community Church

United Church of Christ

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, April 16, 2017

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of Matthew 28:1-10

28 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them.

"Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.

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A Sunday school teacher asked her class on the Sunday before Easter if they knew what happened on Easter and why it was so important.

One little girl spoke up saying: "Easter is when the whole family gets together, and you eat turkey and sing about the pilgrims and all that."

"No, that's not it," said the teacher.

"I know what Easter is," a second student responded. "Easter is when you get a tree and decorate it and give gifts to everybody and sing Jingle Bells."

"Nope, that's not it either," replied the teacher.

Finally a third student spoke up, "Easter is when Jesus was killed, and put in a tomb and left for three days."

"Ah, thank goodness somebody knows" the teacher thought to herself.

And then the student went on: "Then everybody gathers at the tomb and waits to see if Jesus comes out, and if he sees his shadow he has to go back inside and we have six more weeks of winter."

It's no wonder that Easter is surprising and confusing and sometimes makes us afraid. The story of the resurrection is a little unbelievable.

Mark was three years old when his pet lizard died. Since it was her grandson's first brush with death, Grandma suggested that Mark and his older brother hold a "funeral" for the lizard. Grandma explained what a funeral was: a ceremony where you say a prayer, sing a song, and bury your loved one.

Grandma even provided a shoe box and a burial place in the backyard. The boys thought it was a great idea, so they all proceeded to the backyard. Taking the lead, the older brother said a prayer. Then he turned and asked little Mark if he would like to sing a song. With tears in his eyes, Mark clasped his hands, bowed his head, and belted out a song by Ray Charles: "Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more. Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more."

I love that. No "Amazing Grace," no "How Great Thou Art," none of those churchy songs. Instead, "Hit the road Jack." As heartfelt as ever, with all of the grief that comes from such a defining moment. And with all of the hope that the one who has died might find new life on the other side.

It's no wonder that Easter is confusing. The story of the resurrection is a little unbelievable.

Rosemary works in the Dementia & Alzheimer's Unit of a nursing home. She and a colleague, Arlene, brought the residents together one Good Friday afternoon to view Franco Zeffirelli's acclaimed movie production "Jesus of Nazareth." They wondered whether these elderly Alzheimer's patients would even know what was going on, but they thought it might be worth the effort.

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When they finally succeeded in getting everyone into position, they started the video. Rosemary was pleasantly surprised at the quiet attention being paid to the screen. At last was the scene where Mary Magdalene comes upon the empty tomb and sees Jesus' body is not there. Instead, an unknown man, in reality the risen Christ, asks Mary why she is crying, why she is looking for the living among the dead. And then there is a dawning revelation, an awakening, a realization that Jesus has risen; that he is right there beside her. Mary runs as fast as she can back to the disciples and tells Peter and the rest with breathless excitement, "He's alive! I saw Him, I tell you! He's alive." The doubt in their eyes causes Mary to pull back. "You don't believe me . . . You don't believe me!"

From somewhere in the crowd of Alzheimer's patients came the clear, resolute voice of Irene, one of the patients. "WE BELIEVE YOU," she said, "WE BELIEVE YOU!"

I get that. In the muddled and confusing world of Alzheimer's, where no one believes you any more, where reality is sometimes in short supply, where doubting is easier because it is simpler, even from the world of Alzheimer's Irene heard Mary say "He's alive," and responded, "We believe you."

The angels in Matthew's gospel remind me of UPS delivery guy or gal -- very focused on the job at hand. The job is to deliver a package not to try to sell me a package -- just deliver it.

The doorbell rings. "Hey Annette, I understand you have been suffering from a horrible bout of allergies and asthma. Here is the latest and greatest humidifier. It got an excellent Consumer Report rating. There is a rebate coupon enclosed. I highly recommend it."

No, the UPS person is there to deliver a package, not there to *be my buddy or to empathize with me*.

The doorbell rings. "Hey Annette, what do you think about this humidifier? I know anxiety can be part of the process of receiving a package so I just want to reassure you that it will be a positive addition to your home and to encourage you in the big step of accepting it into your home."

No, the UPS guy or gal is there to ring the doorbell, hand me the package, and hold out the electronic clipboard for me to sign for it.

The angels in Matthew's gospel are like that. They are the divine-version of a UPS delivery. This angel is focused on the job—to deliver the Good News. She is not there to sell it to us. She is there to be our buddy or to empathize with us. She is there to deliver the package. It's up to us to sign for it, open it, and use it.

In all of scripture, the Good News is always preceded by one short, preliminary, qualifying sentence: "Don't be afraid."

"Don't be afraid, Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John."

"Don't be afraid, Mary, you will give birth to God."

"Don't be afraid, shepherds. I bring you good news of great joy that shall be to all people."

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"Don't be afraid, Joseph, take Mary as your wife. Her baby is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Name him Jesus; he's going to save all people from their sins."

"Don't be afraid," the angel said. And then she delivers the package, you sign for it, open it, and use it.

"Do not be afraid." Well that ship has already sailed. Mary and Mary are afraid. We are afraid. You cannot simply tell someone to "get over it" or "snap out of it" like it is flipping a switch in your head. Such a command is impossible. Fear simply rises in us when we are confronted with a threatening moment. The fear is physical; it takes the form of an adrenaline burst, makes the heart race, giving us the energy to flee for survival, if necessary. Over time, fear can wear us down physically, mentally and spiritually.

When I hear these words from the angel, though, I think maybe it is not a command. It is meant as a comfort, a reassurance. The angels says "There is nothing to fear. You need not fear."

It's a calming voice from a friend who has come to sit with you in your grief; it's a reassuring presence that this is okay – you are okay – you are broken and you are whole. Your life is a mess and you will be fine. Jesus has already gone ahead of you.

This angel who met the women that morning – this angel knew how to make an entrance, right? An earthquake! A big flourish! An unmistakable – "look over here!" This angel is super strong. This angel rolls back the large, sealed stone. This angel has major attitude. After she rolls back the stone, she sits on it, and crosses her angelic arms. She glances over at the guards who are displaying certain physical symptoms of extreme terror we won't go into. She doesn't tell them not to be afraid, I assume, because she doesn't care if they are afraid or not. That message is being reserving for someone else, or two someone else's.

This angel rolls her eyes, as if to say: "Take that, Pilate. That's what God thinks of your effort to put the Messiah in a tomb! A tomb as a prison for the Prince of Peace, the Son of God? Think again! A tomb for his final resting place? I don't think so." This is indeed a bad-ass angel.

And then, this angel turns its bright angelic eyes to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (probably the mother of Jesus) and says: "Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised, just *as he said*."

You see, don't you, that the empty tomb is too small for the resurrection. The angel tells Mary and Mary that the empty tomb is not a cause for fear or concern, for Jesus has gone ahead. This risen Christ has people to see and things to do. This risen Christ is among the living. This risen Christ is in the fellowship of the women who would be the first witnesses and this risen Christ is in the fellowship of the disciples as they follow Jesus again and again.

You get it, these women were still afraid, of course. Courage is not simply throwing caution to the wind, as they say. Courage is taking action despite the danger. Where the angel's message leaves off the work of the women and the work of the disciples now begins.

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That's why Irene in the Alzheimer's Unit can say with profound faith, "We believe you." That's why three-year-old Mark can sing as he buries his pet lizard. That's why a small congregation can find new ministries. That's why an old congregation can find new life.

Answer the door. There is an angel at your door with a delivery for you. "Don't be afraid. He has been raised from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him. This is my message for you." Sign here.

For me, this is the moment when Easter begins. When we know and believe that death does not win and the tomb is too small to hold the resurrection. Jesus is not there. Jesus is out in the world already doing the next thing. God is still speaking. Now you will see the risen Christ in the places where love changes everything. You will see the risen Christ in acts of patience and kindness. You will see the risen Christ in moments of truth and justice. You will see the risen Christ in every ray of hope and every light of revelation.

Do not be afraid. There is no cause to be afraid. There are so many ways to "explain" the resurrection. Yet, the point is, we can't explain the resurrection. The resurrection explains us! We can only live it. Love always wins.

Amen.