

Easter Sunday ~ April 5, 2015

"FEAR NOT?"

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 10:34-43 ~ Mark 16:1-8

Today we journey with some women to a cemetery. We rise before first light and gather our jars of ointment and spices. We go to finish a hard but familiar task. We go to bury our dead. We go to cover Jesus with the embalming unguents that we could not finish on Friday because Sabbath had begun.

We walk in silence with them ... hoping someone will help us roll away the stone which seals in the dead. But wait! The stone is already rolled back and a young man in a white robe is sitting on the ledge where we left Jesus' body, and he is saying "Fear not!"

What's the first thing you think when your tax accountant says, "Don't worry about it?" You start worrying about it, don't you? What's the first thing you do when your dentist says, "This won't hurt much?" You tense up in anticipation of unbearable pain, am I right? What's the first thing you assume when your child runs into the room shouting "It wasn't my fault!?" You immediately figure it was their fault, and you steel yourself for what's coming next! At least that's what I do.

So when a young man in a white robe ... or a shining angel sent from heaven ... meets you at a tomb and says "Fear not!" it's only natural to feel terrified.

Oh, you may not feel afraid today ... sitting in this beautiful sanctuary among friends and family ... enjoying the music and the flowers ... anticipating what awaits you for Easter lunch. You're safe here, aren't you? Aren't you? No reason to worry. It won't hurt much. It wasn't your fault. Be not afraid. Or are we missing something here?

If you listened closely, you might have noticed that the Gospel of Mark ends in a surprisingly strange way. The other gospels give us stories about Jesus appearing that first Easter morning to Mary Magdalene and Peter and John ... then later to Thomas and the other disciples ... and then to two dull-witted fellows on their walk to Emmaus. Paul says that Jesus appeared to over 500 at one time and also, years later, to him personally on the Damascus road. But the Gospel of Mark ends this way:

As the women entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to

Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

That's it. That's all. The women are alarmed, amazed, terrified, and afraid. They say nothing to anyone. It's as if they've seen a ghost ... but they haven't seen him yet. Mark gives us no glorious appearances of the risen Christ to Peter and John ... no stunning moment of recognition with Mary ... no doubting Thomas reassured ... no breakfast on the beach with the disciples ... no great commission ... no promise of the Spirit. Nothing. Nada. Zip. We are left hanging ... wondering what comes next.

Oh I know that some of your Bibles have a verse 9 after verse 8, and several stories about Jesus showing up with Mary and the disciples and those two guys on the road. They even include a great commission and promises about believers handling snakes and drinking poison and not being hurt. To be honest, that part does scare me. But don't worry about it because scholars have good reason to say that everything after verse 8 was added later by somebody who didn't like the original ending because it didn't have a resurrection ... at least not one that was glorious and convincing like the other gospels. So some dissatisfied scribe along the way added a new ending by piecing together some stories here and there from

the other gospels. Ahhh! That's better! Only, it wasn't what Mark was trying to say.

Mark's gospel ends with alarm. Mark's gospel ends with terror. Mark's gospel ends with the silence of an unspeakable awe. "*So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*" What is Mark trying to tell us? Could it be we're missing something here in our Easter celebration today because we aren't feeling terror or alarm ... or even a mild discomfort with this news of a risen Savior? Easter is good news, of course. Christ is risen ... the church is born ... believers receive life after death. What's so scary about that?

Well, let's think about it. In the first place, this is an event that we cannot even comprehend. The scholars have wrung these stories out and explained them to pieces until there isn't much left ... but scholars don't like anything that they can't explain ... and in the final analysis, they can't explain the resurrection. All the pompous prose of a preacher's sermon can't capture the magnitude of this moment ... nor can the intense distillations of poetry. Music makes a stab, but no virtuoso or oratorio comes even close to exhausting the depths of this reality. The resurrection is so overwhelming in glory ... so profound in effect ... so rich in meaning ... it simply cannot be expressed by any human means. It's like the first

time you see the Grand Canyon ... or the aftermath of a tornado ... or see your own reflection in the eyes of your newborn child ... but it's more than all of these combined. God invented shock and awe ... only it's a good thing ... not a violent thing. And this one thing above all that should get our attention ... that should make us give God our attention for a change.

In the second place, the resurrection is unsettling because this sort of thing just doesn't happen. When people die, they don't come back. And if death isn't final, then we can't trust our own sense of reality. Usually we know what to expect from the world. Violence ... war ... injustice ... tyranny ... dog-eat-dog ... our legislature passing budget business incentives while cutting education and services for thousands upon thousands of children and senior adults ... none of that evil surprises us. That's the way the world is ... always has been ... always will be. So the real resurrection by God of a single dead man shatters our sense of reality. It means that anything might happen. It means that there is something new under the sun. It means that we aren't locked into this cause and effect ... same-old ... same-old world where nothing good ever lasts and greed always gets its way. Instead, this is a world of mystery and miracle ... of unexpected surprises and spectacular good news. But that's a little scary, because it means that we just never know what to expect. We're a little like the drowning person who resists rescue. We like our systems and routines because they give us the illusion that we're in

control. Even if they don't work for us, they're a known quantity. We're used to them. But this news of a risen Savior and a new creation means that all bets are off and that anything is possible. It reminds us that we don't know everything and that we aren't in control and that God might just catch us off guard at any moment. It's a little unnerving, to say the least.

But wait, there's even more. It wasn't just anybody who was raised here. It was Jesus! It was the same Jesus they had betrayed and denied and crucified. It was the same Jesus who confronted the power games of the religious and political leaders of his day by saying that God loves everybody and especially the poor. It was the same Jesus whose voice they tried to stifle with the ultimate putdown. It was the same Jesus who suffered a lonely, agonizing death by torture through the most humiliating means that the powers could imagine in their day. It was the same Jesus who died for the sins of the world. It is the sin of the world ... and our sin ... that this is what we usually do to everything good and godly and gracious sent from above ... we nail it to the cross so it will go away and stop interfering with our plans for dominance and power and wealth. To stop his radical, self-sacrificial, love-of-God-and-each-other talk ... the world tried to silence Jesus. But now he's back, and it's our turn to be silent. It's time for us to hush up, pay attention, and listen to him for a change. We can't say "it wasn't my fault" because it was and is our fault. We all participate in the privileges that come to us from the

abuses of the principalities and powers. And when you think about that ... when you realize the part you played in putting Jesus on the cross ... it's sort of scary to think that he's right here, right now, staring you in the face.

I don't mean to sound like some kind of Bible thumping fundamentalist today, but it worries me that we're more afraid of sounding like Bible-thumping fundamentalists than we are of our spiritual accountability before God. I think of the words on a bumper sticker that I saw ... it said, "*God is coming, and boy is she mad!*" The author of Hebrews puts it more elegantly: "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*" (Heb 10:31). Of course, we don't have to live in constant soul-shame and spirit-fear, because the Christ who is risen has also forgiven. But maybe Mark doesn't want us to rush there too quickly. Maybe Mark doesn't want us to take that grace for granted. Maybe Mark doesn't want us to forgive ourselves in Jesus' name before we've even felt the full weight of our need to be forgiven and to change our ways.

Changing our ways? That's frightening, too, isn't it? What's the first thing you think when a stranger knocks on your door? What is he selling? What is she going to want from me? And while you may not be afraid, you do feel a little apprehensive. Your guard goes up. But let me remind you again. It isn't just anybody who was raised here. It's Jesus! It's the same Jesus who said we should

love our enemies and do good to those who persecuted us. *It's the same Jesus* who told us that God's ultimate judgment of our lives will be entirely based on how we have treated "the least of these." *It's the same Jesus* who told us "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*" (Mark 8:34). And now he is here with us ... risen from the dead ... which means that God agrees with what Jesus said and that God wants us to do what Jesus said ... and if we accept that grace ... we also have to accept that call when Jesus comes knocking at our door. And if God can raise Jesus from the dead, what excuse can we use when Jesus asks us to follow him? He has the power to enable us ... and to ennoble us ... to do whatever he asks us to do. He accepts no "I can't." He understands that there are only "I won't." And to be truthful, that gives me a case of the heebie-jeebies sometimes.

So before we rush into the deal on the promise of eternal life ... before we relax in the good news of God's grace ... maybe Mark wants us to feel the full import of what "Christ is risen" means. Maybe he wants us to get ready for what Jesus will ask of us ... expect of us ... demand of us now. Like Paul tells his friends at Philippi, "*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*" (Phil 2:12).

Most of all, I think Mark leaves out the stories of the risen Christ's appearance to Mary and Peter and John and the others because he wants us to be ready for the

appearance of Christ that matters most ... which of course, is his appearance to us. These resurrection stories in the other gospels are beautiful and glorious, but they happened to somebody else. They happened so long ago. They're almost like fairy tales. We read them two thousand years later, and we feel safe. Those people may have been frightened at the time, but why should we? We're used to them by now. But what if the risen Christ were to appear to you ... and call to you ... and leave you no longer the same? I mean here ... now ... today ... what if you realized that this same Jesus who rose from the dead has a mission on his mind that he wants you to continue ... that he is here to see you ... that he is here to invite you to follow him into life? Would that make you the least bit uncomfortable?

Were you there when he rose up from the tomb?

Were you there when he rose up from the tomb?

Oh, oh - sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Maybe the women in this story have better sense than we do when they greet the announcement "Christ is risen" trembling with alarm, amazement, terror, and fear. It's an awesome thing. So why in the world is this mysterious stranger in Mark's gospel telling us we should "be not dismayed" as we stand today before that empty tomb? Because he knows that after the fear wears off ... and we understand what has happened ... after we have received the forgiveness we know we need and

have accepted joy upon joy ...that there is nothing to fear ... only a majestic reality to embrace.

So I want to say to you today, be afraid. Be very afraid. Jesus Christ is risen, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords has come to demand his crown rights over you.

And I would pay attention if I were you! But I also want to say ... fear not.

Whatever you're worrying about ... let it go. God will see you through ... and what waits on the other side of whatever deaths you're dreading will be better than anything you could ever imagine. Our beloved dead live with God and Christ and have prepared a place for us who follow. We have reason to live ... reason to hope ... reason to laugh ... reason to love.

Only, listen to Mark. This news is real. Stop at the empty tomb and ponder awhile the shock and awe that Jesus Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed! Then, with a God like this ... with a living Savior moving among us to spread the fierce and free-flowing love of God ... you'd be wise to get ready for what's coming next.

May we pray?

Savior, on this Easter morning we greet you with amazement and uncertainty.

Could news this good be true? Encounter us again. Embrace us and call our name.

Turn our sorrow into joy and our despair into hope and our bitterness into love and

our resignation into action as we follow you, our living Savior, into life everlasting. Amen.