

EASTER SUNDAY
With Fear and Great Joy!©

Matthew 28:1-10

April 20, 2014

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We made it! Last week on Palm Sunday we began with such a celebration ... waving palms and shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.”

It was a nice reprieve from the long, dreary Lenten journey through the wilderness. A few happy songs and a parade felt good.

Of course, it didn't last even through the service because we went out from here as somber as we came in happy and joyful, thinking about the week ahead of us – Holy Week.

We dreaded the thought of remembering what Jesus suffered on his way to the cross and of course as he hung there. And if we think we felt some fear in going to that place in our minds, we can only imagine what Jesus' loved ones were experiencing.

Jesus was killed and buried in a tomb and surely all that Friday night and all day Saturday was miserable as they mourned his death and as they feared for their own lives and for what the future would hold.

I'm sure they felt it was the end ... the end of hope; the end of joy; the end of Jesus, for sure.

And because we know its Easter, which means Jesus did not stay dead for long, we would think that the end of their fears would be near, as well, wouldn't we?

But Matthew tells us as the two Mary's came to see the tomb of Jesus, there was an earthquake. Have you ever been in an earthquake? I felt tremors of one when I was back home visiting in Oklahoma. The earthquake was many miles away but just feeling it from a distance was frightening. The walls of the cabin I was staying in by my self seemed to be swaying. I thought someone had run into the wall outside of where I was sitting.

Can you imagine two women, alone in a deserted place, experiencing an earthquake?

But if that weren't enough, an angel descended from the heavens, his clothes as flashy as lightning. He rolled back the stone at the tomb and took a seat on it.

So ... would you be a little frightened, a little breathless at that occurrence? I certainly would!

Certainly the guards who had been placed there to make sure the disciples didn't try to steal Jesus' body were afraid. They shook so hard they fainted.

The two Mary's – Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene – had to be afraid. After all they had been through I would imagine they were just about limp with fear.

But the angel says, "Do NOT be afraid." Think of the scene. Think of all that happened. Do not be afraid? Seriously?

But he told them, "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come and see where he had been lying but then go quickly and tell his disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead."

So they peeked in the tomb, saw it was empty and did as they were told – they started running to tell this astounding news to the disciples. They went with joy. But yes, Matthew tells us they also went with fear. Fear and great joy. They had not yet been able to erase the fear although now they had joy as well.

Of course their joy was about to be tripled because as they were on their way, Jesus intercepted them and greeted them. They fell to the ground and took hold of his feet and worshiped him right then and there.

And Jesus, like the angel, told them not to be afraid but to go tell the disciples that he is alive and he will meet them in Galilee. And they did. These women were the first evangelists – the first to proclaim the resurrection message that God's power raised Jesus from the dead, that He is alive.

Unlike the other gospel writers, Matthew focuses less on the empty tomb and more on the response.

Matthew's message is about resurrection; about new life; about hope right in the middle of despair, about joy even when there is fear, even when the fear doesn't go away.

Matthew's entire gospel is about resurrection, not just in this story but throughout the life and acts of Jesus. Resurrection is not the grand finale. It is not the end of the story. It is just the beginning.

The rest of the story is Jesus telling the women to go and share the news; Jesus telling the disciples to make disciples and baptize them. The rest of the story is about you and me and our response to the resurrection.

Just during these past 40 days of Lent I've come to know more about you, my Easter peeps. We've shared some burdens, some fears, some grief. I know there is fear in

some of your hearts, just as there was on that morning for the two Mary's. I know that you have struggles, things you are worried about.

I know that you are human and in our human state we all have challenges in our lives that sometimes seems overwhelming. And so with love and joy I gladly proclaim that the resurrection is for you!

I think Easter brings us to a certain place. Certainly, it brings us to the other side of the Lenten journey. I pray that your reflection and examination of where you are in your relationship with Jesus has been a growing, helpful experience. I pray that while Lent is over, your spiritual growth will continue on.

Easter brings us to the other side of the cross. The place where we contemplate what Jesus did for us in his death. We must think about the powerful love of God who gave so much for our forgiveness.

And Easter brings us to a place where we have to ask ourselves what we really believe about the resurrection. Do we believe it happened? Believing in the resurrection is very much like the rest of the Christian faith. We read about it. We hear it. We study it. We know what the facts supposedly are. But having knowledge is not the same as believing.

If we had scientific proof and data showing every detail of how the resurrection happened and when and where, that would still not be the same as believing.

Believing in the resurrection is faith. And faith is planted into willing hearts and open minds. Faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit. It is believing without seeing; without proof.

If we believe that God's loving, amazing power raised Jesus from the dead, then Easter brings us to a new place in life. Easter, with its own promise of new life, new possibilities, challenges us to respond in new ways:

To be more tolerant; to be more loving; to be forgiving; to act like Christ, to trust him more, to learn more and to follow in his footsteps.

Does believing in the resurrection cause you to stop being afraid? It might. Or it might somewhat. Or it might not at all.

But the difference for the two Mary's was that they went to the tomb that morning with grief and fear. But they left the tomb – still with fear – but now also with great joy.

Joy did not replace the fear but joy made the fear less paralyzing. Joy gave hope a home once again in the heart and the mind. Joy made room for courage where once fear crowded courage out.

Resurrection brings new life, changed lives. Resurrection brings new beginnings – it calls for new action. Resurrection calls you out of the tomb of fear and even with the fear still in you, it gives joy that makes the fear seem not so huge. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! The tomb is empty! What is your response?

(Spontaneous, joyful liturgical dance followed)

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