

Easter Courage

Matthew 28: 1-10 -- After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he* lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead,* and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

"Do not be afraid."

That's the first words the angel says to the Mary's when they come to Jesus' tomb. And I think there's good reason for that. Matthew's account of the resurrection has the most shocking imagery of all of the gospels. There's an earthquake and an angel coming out of the sky. The men guarding the tomb become paralyzed with fear.

But I think it's deeper than that. Think of everything the women had been through. They had pinned all their hopes on Jesus only to see him die the most horrible death imaginable. And the people who had killed Jesus may not be satisfied with just killing the leader. They may want to make an example of his followers.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had a lot of good reasons to be afraid.

As I read this story over and over again this week, I've been thinking a lot about the role fear plays in the story of the resurrection and of the angels words to not be afraid. And I want to invite us to think, just for a moment, about the things that make us feel afraid.

When I was a kid, I was afraid of a lot of things – I mean maybe more so than most kids.

The first thing I was afraid of was a "mean man" coming to get us, even though we lived in a town so small, you really didn't need to lock your doors at night. I was afraid that our house might catch on fire. I was afraid of tornadoes. One time, I even worried that our house might catch on fire during a tornado. I said to my Mom, "What if our house catches on fire while there is a tornado. We can't go outside because the tornado will get us. We can't go to the basement because the fire will get us."

And when I had these fears, my parents calmly assured me that everything is ok.

I bet some of you can relate to this. If you're a kid, do you remember a time when you were really scared and your grownups told you, "It's going to be ok." Maybe they gave you a big hug when they told you that.

Or for adults, can you think of a time when you did that for a child? Like the angel told the women, we've all said it in one way or another to our children, "Don't be afraid. It's going to be ok." And a lot of times when we say that, it's because as an adult we have a perspective that is different from a child. For example, my parents understood that the chances of a mean man coming to get us was very small. The same with our house catching on fire or a tornado destroying our home. They understood that while technically those events are possible, they are very, very unlikely and, even if they occur, they've taken all the precautions they can to keep us safe. My parents had a more complete picture of everything that was going on than I did.

Their reassurance to me – "Don't be afraid" – came from a place of knowing things that I didn't know.

I think that's what's going on with the angel's instructions to the Mary's in the story. The angel knew that there was more to the story than what the women were able to see in that moment. They knew that Jesus had risen from the dead. It's not that there weren't good reasons for the women to be afraid, but rather it's that the angels knew that there was a deeper reality.

The resurrection changes everything.

In the resurrection, we have God's promise that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient — no doubt real and at times painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality.

That's what the angel knew that the Mary's did not and that's why the angel could say with confidence, "Do not be afraid."

Friends, our faith is not just about believing that one person rose from the dead 2000 years ago, rather, our faith is about trusting that nothing can ultimately overcome the reality of God's love. To say, "Do not be afraid," is to say that God's love will always have the final say.

And yet, I know that's a lot easier said than done. While I'm no longer afraid of tornadoes and fires and mean men, there is still a lot that makes me afraid. I worry about my kids. I worry about the state of the world. I worry about a lot. I hear the words of the angel about not being afraid and sometimes I think, "That's easy for you to say. I can't just will myself to not be afraid."

And that's why I think it's important for us to understand the angel's words are not a command but are more like the calming voice we try to offer to our kids when they're afraid. It's not like

the angel is saying, "Stop being afraid. What's the matter with you? Don't you have enough faith." Rather, the angel's statement is more like, "I know you're scared right now. But I want you to know it's going to be ok. I promise. It's going to be ok."

The sense of "Do not be afraid" is not an emphatic requirement but a comforting assurance: Whatever you're afraid of does not have the last word. This calming voice comes from an authority who speaks with power that is beyond this world. The announcement of the resurrection doesn't take away the things that make the women afraid. But instead, it empowers them to keep their faith even in the midst of their fears, trusting in that which they do not fully understand.

And that's exactly what they do. They leave the empty tomb and become the very first preachers of the resurrection. Maybe they could hardly walk because their legs felt wobbly beneath them. Maybe their voice shook when they told the disciples that Jesus had risen.

But even so, they preached the gospel.

They proclaimed Jesus had come out of the tomb.

This is the very definition of courage.

Courage isn't about not being afraid of anything. That's more ignorance than courage because there's a lot that we should fear. Rather, courage is about not letting our fears stop us from doing what we know we should do.

And courage is precisely what Easter is about.

In a world of conflict and division, courage asks us to look for our common humanity.

In a world of power and domination, courage asks us to give ourselves to serving others.

In a world of oppression and injustice, courage asks us to stand with those who are marginalized.

In a world of greed and selfishness, courage asks us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

And none of those are easy things to do. All of those things can be scary to do. And that's why Easter is all about courage.

Easter is about having the courage to trust that what Jesus says to us about what life is all about really is what life is all about. Life is about love and friendship and community and peacemaking and justice and service.

And whenever we find ourselves scared to live by those values in a world that at time can seem harsh, let's remember the words of the angel, "Don't be afraid."

Jesus is risen.

And that changes everything.