

“...for they were afraid”

Mar. 31, 2024 – Easter Sunday

The horrors of the last several days had driven the men in to hiding. Having seen what happens when church and state conspire to preserve their positions of power, the men are keeping their heads down – it was time for a new kind of faithful hero.

In this story told by men, these women from the background (two Marys’ and Salome) - who had walked just as far, and seen just as much - start the week on a mission of love. They will do for Jesus what decency demands.

Everything about Friday was wrong. A betrayal leads to Jesus’ arrest. A sham religious trial, full of questionable witnesses; an audience with Pilate that had no hope of success (Pilate was too much of a populist to do the right thing); a protracted, torturous death; a hasty burial in a borrowed tomb. None of the rites have been observed, the body simply wrapped and laid to rest. The women look to bring some normalcy to the events surrounding Jesus’ death. But make no mistake, it required immense courage to gather the spices and go to the tomb in the early morning light.

Their fear is real, but it can’t keep them from doing what must be done.

It is only when they see the tomb that their fear takes hold.

The massive stone is rolled away. The tomb is not what they expect. And they are met by a young stranger with strange and wonderful news. ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.’

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We are so relieved to be here; Easter Sunday is pivotal moment of grace and goodness, according to the traditions of our faith. The day of triumph. The day of promise. The day life and love win the battle over death and despair. But the day begins – here in the earliest written account – with anxiety and fear.

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The indignity of crucifixion was bad enough. An empty tomb looks like a further betrayal. The hopeful message is too fantastic to be believed in the moment.

The women know – as we do - that the world doesn't work this way. Our fervent wishes and fondest hopes are, generally speaking, not granted. Praying doesn't always bring a favourable result – no matter the depth of our faith...and don't you think that these women spent the last three days praying and hoping and longing for some sign that this had all been a terrible dream?

And don't you imagine that, finding those prayers suddenly and completely answered, they find themselves nearly frozen with a new kind of terror?

Their fear is understandable; natural. And we know what it is like to be afraid in the face of the unexpected.

When the dead are raised – when the messenger offers good news of great joy – we are forced (as the women were forced) to reconsider our understanding of the world. The rules, it seems, have been changed.

Humans had rejected Jesus' ideas. His notions about the depth and breadth of God's love were just too much. His campaign to convince people that God is engaged, and that God's kingdom was within, around and among us was too radical. Jesus represented a change that seemed to go too far, and so, humans meant to stop it.

God had other ideas. God ALWAYS has other ideas.

Easter is our annual reminder of the resurrection – a celebration of the love and mercy of God revealed in the risen Jesus. We find hope and purpose and peace and abundant life in this annual festival of life abundant. We claim salvation, and acknowledge that God has started a new thing – a bold covenant – a peaceable kingdom. The worst that humanity had to offer was not enough to keep Jesus in a tomb – or to keep God from acting in our best interest.

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We humans have been given a chance for a fresh start. And that is when our hearts start to beat a little faster.

We understand fear in the face of radical change. When we first learn of Jesus – when we hear of his miracles – when we celebrate his resurrection – we begin to believe that the world seems full of potential; in spite of everything, people seem redeemable; the future looks less grim. ***And that is terrifying, because it means we need to change our approach – to the world and all the people in it.***

We are invited to honour the weak. We are bold to ask questions of the mighty – to be critical of selfish ambition. If the heavenly messenger is to be believed – if the tomb stands empty and Jesus is Risen - the things we’ve long taken for granted are no longer certain, and that uncertainty shakes us to our bones.

A world with Jesus in it is not the world we were taught to expect. It is a kinder, gentler, more compassionate place, and our former, cynical, selfish approach to life seems no to work so well.

A life devoted to the way of Jesus is not at all easy. It is full of difficult decisions and challenging encounters - heavenly messengers and empty tombs are heart-stopping encounters, even now - but the reward of love; this ray of hope in a dark and troubling time; the gift of an empty tomb and a risen Saviour is what we need to keep us moving forward – to keep us following Jesus. So it is that even here – even now; in spite of the suffering, the brokenness, the struggle and the strife, and the fear that would keep us quiet – we are bold to say Hallelujah! Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed!