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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church

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Easter Sunday

Mathew 28:1-10

“Go to Galilee”

On Thursday morning I asked my most trusted advisor of all things churchy, “What do you think people want to hear on Easter morning?” Lucky for me he didn’t say, “The music,” which, truth be told, every preacher knows is true! (And the music sure is great this morning, isn’t it?)

Instead, my trusted advisor and I talked it through, and afterwards I came to the conclusion that there are two things I really want you to hear this morning.

The first is that the resurrection is real. That may sound like an odd statement for a pastor to make, but I want you to know that the resurrection is real, and I don’t mean real in the factual sort of way things are real, like we can set out to prove with scientific evidence that the resurrection happened exactly like the Bible describes-which, by the way, it describes in 4 very different ways. But I mean real in the sense that the resurrection tells us something about God, something about God I believe to be true, and that is that **God loves us and does not want us to be afraid.**

So that’s the first thing I want you to hear. **That the God who created you loves you and does not want you to be afraid.**

The second thing I want you to hear is that we need to share this message with other people. This message can change peoples’ lives. There are so many hurting, fearful people and places in this world who need to hear that the God who created them, loves them, **and does not want them to be afraid.** You see, we have a part to play in this resurrection story, a very important part, because God calls us to **go, and to** share with others with this powerful message (of God’s love).

So that’s the second thing I want you to hear. That we need to **go and** share with other people the message that the God who created them loves them **and does not want them to be afraid because this message can change people’s lives.**

It changed the lives of the women who went to the tomb that first Easter morning; it changed the lives of the disciples who went to Galilee to meet Jesus there; it changed the lives of the Roman soldiers who stood guard at the tomb and then bribed people to say it all was a hoax; it’s changed the lives of billions of people who have heard it ever since then; it’s changed my life, and hopefully it has changed or will change yours.

When the women approached the tomb that first Easter morning, they went to see the tomb . . .the final resting place of Jesus. They went like any one of us would go to the grave of a loved one the day after his or her funeral. We go to capture some essence of that person, or to feel closer to that person. As time goes on, we might go to the grave to recall stories of times gone by, maybe laugh a little, maybe cry a little.

It was no different for the women. As far as they knew, the tomb was the site of the last sad chapter in Jesus' once promising story, the closing scene of the saddest story ever told.

But instead, a message greets them. A life-changing message. It's so life changing it's accompanied by an earthquake and an angel that causes the guards at the tomb to become like dead men.

"Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised."

Of course, the life changing message doesn't stop there. Because next comes the command: "Come, see the place where he lay. Then 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.'"

And they do. They come and see and then run and tell. And Matthew describes their obedience as a mixture of "fear and joy." Fear and joy.

It's an odd combination of emotions, ***But we know those emotions well, that odd mixture of fear and joy.*** Falling in love is both a fearful time and a joyful time, as is the birth of children. We may fear the fate of a loved one struggling with an illness, but there is joy in the gift that person has been to us. There's fear about the future amid problems both national and global; but there's joy in the present moment.

What's striking about the angel's announcement concerning the resurrection, is that it doesn't erase the women's fear. Instead, it enables them to keep faith despite their fears. It gives them courage. Why? Because it's life changing. It 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 – real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word. Instead, the life changing message that the God who created us loves us and does not want us to be afraid, does.

God does not want us to live as captives to our fears. God wants us to live with courage and hope. Easter is the assurance that whatever happens to us, whatever a day may hold, God has the power to strengthen and uphold us; whatever we may face, we do not face it alone, that nothing we encounter is stronger than God's love; that ultimately God gets the last word; that in the end, God's love is triumphant. (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, commentary on Matthew 28:1-10, Martin B. Copenhaver*) Because of Easter we can live with the hope and promise that God loves us and does not want us to be afraid.

So the women go and tell this life changing message to the disciples and add one important instruction, one very important instruction from Jesus: go to Galilee.

Where is Galilee? Geographically speaking, it's located in the northern part of Israel. But theologically speaking, it's much more than that. Galilee was the place where Jesus' ministry was lived out . . . where he called the disciples, taught the crowds, healed the sick, appointed the twelve, showed compassion on the suffering, offered the weary rest, spoke in parables, fed the multitudes, blessed the children, challenged a rich man, and taught about a Messiah who would suffer. That's Galilee.

The point of telling the disciples to meet him in Galilee is straightforward: the disciples' ministry, and therefore our ministry, is to be carried out in all those fearful, hurting places where people need to hear

that God loves them and does not want them to be afraid. That because of the resurrection they can live with courage and hope.

Galilee is the gateway to the world, and this story is to be taken to the world and shared with the world. Easter is not the end, but only the beginning. Easter continues with us. It continues with us when we, as a congregation, will literally go next Sunday, and work in the community garden that provides fresh produce for Circle of Concern food pantry; when we'll plant flowers for the women at Lydia's House who have suffered at the hands of their abuser and need some hope; when we'll make blankets for soldiers who need courage for their work; and collect recyclables so we can be good stewards of God's beautiful creation.

We go to share the message that God loves the world and does not want the world to be afraid because that's what Jesus instructed his disciples to do. "Go," he says. "It's your job now, and I promise to go with you and be with you." Jesus promises that when we go into the world, he **will** be there with us.

But I need to caution you that even with this assurance, there is another storyteller on the loose, one who does not want us to go and tell this message.

This storyteller is symbolized in the guards and leaders who do not want people to believe the resurrection is real. First, they go to Pilate and tell him to secure the tomb as tightly as possible, and then after the report that he has been raised despite their attempts to kill him and keep him dead, they bribe the guards to tell the people that the disciples stole his body.

These men are leaders; they have real station and gravitas, and they're invested for all they're worth in the status quo. They don't want anything to interrupt the status quo or change the way things are. Old men trying to keep the sun from rising, Frederick Buechner calls them.

And they're afraid. Very afraid. They fear that what Jesus said might actually happen, that he might actually get up and walk out of that tomb. And that was not only unthinkable, it would change everything. If Jesus of Nazareth really was the Christ, and if in him death was somehow defeated, then we're living in a brand new world. And those men preferred the old world, where hope was in constant danger, and might made right, and peace had little chance, and the rich got richer, and the weak all eventually suffered under some Pontius Pilate or another, and people hatched murderous plots, and dead people stayed dead.

It was a world where fear ran rampant, courage was in short supply, and the death of hope ran like a never ending obituary in the town paper.

Friends, this storyteller is still alive today, masquerading in all sorts of disguises, and does not want us to imagine an Easter world, which is a world where God wipes away the tears from all eyes, and where people of different races, ethnicities, and religions sit down together at a banquet table. This storyteller does not want us to imagine a world where children are fed, and all the sick are cared for, a world where children are not gunned down, where the elderly are secure, and where precious resources are invested in life, not death.

This storyteller is still alive, and the paper still runs the never ending obituary of the death of hope.

But it doesn't have to be this way, because the resurrection is real, and gives us the courage to go and tell despite the fears we may have, to go and tell the wonderful news that Christ is alive, and that he is risen.

Last week I heard the story about the funeral service of Winston Churchill. It reminded me of the promise of Easter courage in the face of daily fears. Perhaps you've heard the story. At the close of the service that Churchill planned himself, a single trumpeter stood at the west end of St. Paul's Abby and sounded "Taps," the song that signals dusk and the close of another day and is frequently played at the end of a military funeral. But after a moment of stillness that followed the last plaintive note of that song, another trumpeter stood at the east end of St. Paul's, the end that faced the rising sun, and played "Reveille," the song of the morning and the call to a new day.

Churchill perceived, you see, that Christ's resurrection signals above and beyond all else that our God is a God of new life and never-ending possibility. The good news of Christ's resurrection does not take away our fear -- though sometimes we wish desperately that it would -- but it does offer us courage and hope by anchoring us in the sure promise that God will have the last word, and that that word is one of light and life and grace and mercy and love and peace.

I want to close with a story about my 6 year old daughter, Charlotte, who's prone to waking up in the middle of the night because she can be scared of the dark. I'm often reminding me her before bedtime, "You don't need to be afraid. Everything is going to be alright."

Last week she woke up in the morning and announced to me, "I was brave last night."

I was brave.

Friends, be brave. Go with courage to tell the good news to the world, a world that so desperately needs to hear some good news, that the resurrection is real, because it shows us what is true-that the God who created us, loves us, and does not want to be afraid.

So go. Be brave. Have courage. Tell the good news. And hold on to what is good. Because Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Amen.

Sources:

"Dear Working Preacher", Easter Courage, David Lose, April 16, 2014, www.workingpreacher.org

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2