

Afraid Yet Filled With Joy

Text: Matthew 28:1-10

Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – April 12, 2020

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This is not how our Easter and Holy Week observances are supposed to be. Every year, I have a routine that I follow pretty closely during Holy Week. The Good Friday service is my favorite service to plan and execute, and I love the drama and intensity of it. I believe that we need that – well, maybe until this year – to experience a minute part of what Jesus did for us. I usually come over to the church on Saturday afternoon, as the sun is coming through the front stained glass window and I look at the lilies for the first time. Their beauty – their fragrance – and the quietness of our sanctuary in the afternoon. It is a holy moment for me.

On Saturday night, I typically cannot fall asleep because I am thinking about Easter services on Sunday. (that and I am usually panicked that I will oversleep and miss the sunrise service!). When I awake early on Sunday morning, I come over to the church to check on the breakfast things – sometimes plug in the coffee pot – and double check everything before I head over to Union Cemetery to see how many have gathered for our sunrise service. Then it is back to the church for breakfast and then gathering again for Easter worship where there is a brightness, a spirit in our beautiful old sanctuary unlike any other Sunday during the year.

To be honest, I did a few things this week. I tried to make the Zoom Good Friday service as dramatic and as intense as cyberspace would allow. I did come over the sanctuary yesterday afternoon as the sun was coming through the front stained glass window and just sat in a pew for some time of quiet, reflection and prayer. Admittedly, it was nice to sleep in a little later this morning and not have to get up at 5am to get ready for the sunrise service. And here we are.

In some ways, this week has proven to be more raw, more vulnerable, and more disjointed than I could have ever imagined – and I truly struggled with writing this sermon.

What to say when so many people are hurting – when we are so unsure about so many things. Perhaps like the disciples and women felt as they watched Jesus arrested, crucified and buried. With those feelings so real for us, we enter this part of the story from Matthew’s Gospel. “After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.”

If they had not suffered enough the last few days, now the women had to endure the rumbling of an earthquake – a violent one at that. They approach, I am sure, cautiously and tentatively. They see the guards, whom the text tells us “were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.” The angel tells the women not to fear and that Jesus has risen, just as he said – and invites them to come and see. The women run from the scene to let the disciples know what they have just seen and heard. As they hurry, Matthew says that they are “afraid yet filled with joy.”

And then – suddenly – Jesus meets them. They recognize Him and fall to the ground and grab a hold of His feet and worship Him. Jesus says to them, “Do not be afraid.” Four times in these ten verses, there is a reference to fear and being afraid. Of course, the women were afraid. They could not believe their ears and eyes that Jesus was alive – grief turned to fear. No wonder the guards are afraid – violent earthquake, angel appears whose appearance was like lightning and rolls the stone away. Fear – anxiety – not knowing what to do with emotion. These are all a part of the women’s reactions to the Sabbath morning.

And yet, I was struck this week by the part of the verse that said that they were “afraid, yet filled with joy.” How did that feel for them? How did they name that emotion and sense inside them? How could they feel both fear and joy at the same time?

Maybe before this Easter, we could not relate or fathom what Matthew was talking about in the women’s emotions. Before this year, maybe we could not comprehend how someone could both be afraid and yet be filled – not just a sensing or smidge of joy, but to be filled. Yet, this Easter, I think this is our goal. To combat our fear by being filled with joy. To know and understand that even though things are looking bleak right now, people are afraid of the virus and of the financial impact on each one of us, there can be that other emotion because of the hope that we find so completely in Jesus Christ.

I realized – even as I was typing these words for the sermon – that the concept of afraid yet filled with joy may sound ridiculous to some right now. For there is no way that you could be filled with joy when you are filled with so much stress and anxiety and fear and sadness and uncertainty. Joy is the absolute last thing that is possible. I understand – I get it. I have been there this week at times. And more importantly, God understands. God gets it.

So, for today – and in the days ahead, as we work through these times, as we hopefully see improvement and the curve start to flatten, be afraid yet filled with _____. What? Can you be afraid, yet filled with peace? God is with us. We are together. While we are self-isolated in our homes and encouraged to only go out for essentials, we can have peace because families are joined together – whether in person or by the phone or Facetime or texting. Peace because we can still meet for worship, prayer and to fellowship. Peace because the tomb is empty and Jesus has defeated sin and death once and for all.

Or maybe even peace is too much for you. Afraid yet filled with love. The love of your spouse, your children and grandchildren, your family, your friends, your church family.

Uncertain because of what is going on, but secure and filled because you have a support system that has your back, that can encourage you and support you and make you laugh. That can hug you or talk you off the ledge when you get to that point.

Afraid yet filled because I got dressed this morning. Filled because I was able to make a meal and unload the dishwasher. Filled because I turned my camera on for Zoom worship this morning and my church family can see all my imperfections and not at my best. Afraid yet filled with okayness some of the time. At this point, that is perfectly fine. I will take that.

Jesus changed the lives of the women and the disciples. They devoted their entire beings to Him, and when they thought He was taken from them, they were devastated. On the Resurrection morning, they found out that He was alive – that God had raised Jesus from the dead. And so, they were afraid yet filled with joy!

Friends, we can be afraid, but we need to remember and re-recognize that there is more to this pandemic than all the gloom and doom that we hear and see on the news. We have Jesus Christ – who is our Rock, our salvation, our refuge in times of trouble – our way, our truth and our life. And on this Easter Sunday, we remember and celebrate – regardless of where we are – that He is alive. That we have hope. That we have a God who thinks we are pretty cool – and loves us enough to defeat death for us.

Be afraid, yes, yet filled with something. That something that allows you to go on – to take each day as it comes – because Your Savior, Jesus Christ, died and rose again for you and for me. To God be the glory – Hallelujah! Amen.