

## “DO NOT BE AFRAID”

A Sermon for Easter, April 16, 2017

Text: Matthew 28:1-10

The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid.”

Jesus said to the women, “Do not be afraid.”

But who of us is afraid? This is a day of jubilation, hope, beauty . . .

Can we back up a bit and ask why Jesus and the angel didn’t just do a fist pump and shout “Hallelujah!”?

What was there to fear that Easter day?

An earthquake? An angel? Seeing (what looked like it must be) a ghost?

Let’s suppose that the message “do not be afraid” was (and maybe still is) profound good news. What if “Do not be afraid” equals “Peace—shalom—be with you”? What if the “negative imperative” “Do not be afraid” is not just an occasion for a party but also the basis for the existence of the church? What if this is the cash value, the whole content of the message we receive at our baptism, at communion, and in every sermon?

“Do not be afraid.”

For context, let’s look at the book of Matthew and ask . . . who was afraid back then, and why? The word is used a handful of times:

- Joseph was afraid to marry his pregnant fiancé.
- Joseph was afraid to take the infant Jesus to Judah because of King Archelaus.
- The disciples were afraid the boat was going to sink in a storm.
- (I want to come back to Matthew 10:31, which is a special case.)
- The disciples were afraid when they saw Jesus walk on the Sea of Galilee early one morning.

- The disciples were also afraid on the Mount of Transfiguration, at the vision they had.
- The chief priests and elders were afraid to admit publicly that they didn’t believe John the Baptist had come from God.
- And, finally, in a parable Jesus told, the servant who had only one talent was afraid to invest it because he thought he might get in trouble if he didn’t do it right.

To summarize, in Matthew’s gospel people are sometimes afraid—of getting in trouble, of moving, of drowning, of being attacked, of being humiliated or fired, of losing their investments, of things they don’t understand, of people with extraordinary power, of new experiences, and so on. It’s like a catalog of our own great fears. Those times in our lives when we are tempted to let our path through life be determined by what we are afraid of, instead of by truth and goodness; when we are tempted to be shaped by what scares us, instead of by obedience to Christ. Occasional, acute fears.

However, let’s go back to Matthew 10:31.

It is a special case because “do not be afraid” is the theme of the entire chapter. Matthew 10 is called Jesus’ “Missionary Sermon.” Before he sent out his twelve disciples he gave them responsibilities, and he told them how perilous it would be to represent him. He said “Do not be afraid.” But then he told them “I am sending you out as sheep among wolves.” He said “Do not be afraid.” Then: “They will hand you over to councils and flog you in synagogues.” “Do not be afraid.” But “You will be hated by all because of my name.”

That alternation in this chapter makes your head spin. On the one hand, He sent them out to live

more dangerously than ever. They should not expect their life to get easier as they followed him. They would have a crucified Lord. They might expect to be crucified.

“On the other hand, do not be afraid.”

Jesus wove those themes together for a reason, which we discern at the beginning of the chapter, where Matthew tells us why Jesus sent them out: “He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.” To translate: he sent his disciples to people with trouble, and told them to help courageously. Like the firefighters going into the towers on 9/11, he charged his disciples to be people who run towards trouble, not away from it. For the salvation of the world.

That kind of “do not be afraid” is different from telling people “do not be afraid” to water ski. Which I was afraid of, the first time, although Christine told me “Do not be afraid.”

But Jesus meant for his disciples to be fearless in mission once he had risen from the dead. “Do not be afraid,” he said to the women. “And tell my friends to meet me in Galilee. The mission goes on. From now on I will be sending you to live for the world, courageously. To heal the world.”

Jesus was talking to some already very brave women, fearless women. He didn’t need to tell them not to be scared of insects, or visions, or people. They weren’t scared.

But he had good news for them, as he has for the rest of his followers. Which is that because he is raised from the dead we can courageously carry out his vision for the world.

The men and women who were Jesus’ disciples, who bravely accompanied him to Jerusalem even though they were afraid they might be killed with Jesus, had a problem when Jesus died. Had they been gullible,

in following Jesus? Had they fallen for a cult leader who was promising them a peace he could not deliver? Were Jesus and his “good news of the kingdom” too good to be true?

That was a distinct possibility on Good Friday, despite the nice meal they had with Jesus the evening before. All his promises were on hold when he was nailed to the cross. Had the crucified one told them to be different from Gentiles? To love one another? That their sins were forgiven? That they belonged to him and his kingdom? That he was the son of God? All of that good news was suspect, and they held their collective breath when Jesus breathed his last.

But when, on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb and heard that he had risen . . . and then, when they actually ran into them and he said “Hello! How are you, this morning?” (actually, he said “chaire” which means “greetings”) . . . he could tell that they had been holding their breath since Friday, so he said to them, “Do not be afraid,” and he meant “You can breathe again. All of it is true.”

In telling them to go and meet him in Galilee, he was saying that anyone who during the course of his ministry in Galilee had lost their fear because of what he had done for them or what he had told them; everyone who had been healed, everyone who had been accepted or forgiven, all these people could breathe again. Their encounter with Jesus of Nazareth had not just been a sweet “Camelot” moment to cherish. It had been a revelation of “the way, the truth, and the life.”

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus said to the women, and later to the disciples when he sent them out to be him to the world. “Do not be afraid,” he meant, “to follow me as once you followed me. Refuse to let yourselves be shaped by the dangers you see, the very real dangers in the world. Rather, courageously shape the world with the change you

see in me, for the healing of people, the healing of the world.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells us. And he does not just mean don’t be startled by loud noises or flashing lights.

He means that he has overcome the world, and he goes ahead of us. Wherever we go in his name.

Amen.

