

2024 03 31 – *Don't Be Afraid*

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

According to the Gospel of Mark, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome were there on Friday afternoon, looking on from a distance, when Jesus, hanging on the cross, “uttered a loud cry and breathed his last” (see Mark 15:37-40). They watched as he died a brutal death. Two of the women were also there, later that day, when Jesus’ body was laid in the tomb and a large stone was rolled across the entrance (see Mark 15:46-47).

These women were among Jesus’ closest friends. They had followed Jesus when he was in Galilee. They had attended to his needs while he was busy, going from town to town, teaching and healing. And, with many others, they had travelled with Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover festival (see Mark 15 41).

Even after his death they continued to care for Jesus. As soon as the sun went down on Saturday evening, signaling the end of the Jewish Sabbath, the three women went to the market to buy some spices and oils so they could anoint his body. And then, just as the sun was rising on Sunday morning, they headed back to the tomb.

Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome came to Jerusalem for a celebration, a religious festival, and instead they watched as Jesus was crucified and buried. We can only imagine the emotions that they were experiencing as they walked towards the tomb: overwhelming grief at the loss of

their friend and teacher, shock at the suddenness, the horror of his death, fear about their own safety, anxiety about the future and, of course, worry about how they were going to move the huge stone that covered the entrance to the tomb.

Just imagine their astonishment when they arrived and found that the stone had already been rolled back. Today's story doesn't even mention any hesitation. It just says, "On entering the tomb, they saw a young person sitting at the right, dressed in a white robe. They were frightened." I would have been terrified, in fact, I'm not even sure I would have gone into the tomb, knowing that it had already been disturbed. Those women had no way of knowing what they would find. Of course they were frightened! Here's a living, breathing being sitting in the place where they expected to find the body of their dead rabbi! Fear is a natural response!

Fear can be a good thing. It can keep us safe. It can let us know when we are in imminent danger. It is fear that tells us to go inside and find a safe place to hide when a tornado is coming. It is fear that keeps us out of the water when there is a shark sighting. It is fear that convinces us to bundle up or even stay inside when it is -40 degrees with wind chill.

Mary and Mary and Salome had good reason to be afraid. The young person in the tomb could see their fear and attempted to reassure the women saying, "Do not be amazed!" Other translations use the phrase "Do not be alarmed" or "Don't be afraid." The youth goes on to say, "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the One who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where

they laid him.” Yes, they could see that Jesus’ body was no longer there. But how could they know what that meant? I’m not sure that this stranger saying, “Don’t be alarmed,” or “Do not be amazed,” was really much of a help. In fact, the scripture tells us “They made their way out and fled from the tomb bewildered and trembling; but they said nothing to anyone, because they were so afraid.”

I wonder how long their fear lasted. We know it didn’t last forever. If it had, this story would not exist. Even though it is not stated explicitly, in this original ending of Mark’s gospel, it is clear that the women eventually shared what they had seen and heard. They eventually found the courage to speak out about their experience.

It is one thing to be afraid when we are in imminent danger. It is another to feel fear or anxiety about something that is in the past or the future. There’s a study that is done each year by Chapman University in the United States that reveals the top 10 fears in America. The last study was done in October 2023 and those fears included things like: corrupt government officials, economic collapse, nuclear war, people I love becoming ill or dying, pollution of drinking water and cyber-terrorism. We could argue that these events are all possible, maybe even probable, but none of them are imminent. We often feel fear about things that are beyond our control, things that could create change in our lives, things that could possibly hurt us or the ones we love.

<https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2023/10/20/the-top-10-fears-in-american-2023/>

That kind of fear or anxiety, fear of what might or could happen, can be paralyzing. What helps me get through that kind of fear is the promise of the Easter Story. The young person in the tomb told the women, 'Now go and tell the disciples and Peter, "Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee, where you will see him just as he told you."' The youth was telling the women that they were not alone, that Jesus was still with them, that his ministry would continue through them. For me, this is the good news of the Easter Story. I don't care whether the story itself is factually true or whether it is purely parable. For me, the truth of the Easter Story is that the Risen Christ was with the disciples and is still with us now. The Risen Christ is the healing power of the Holy Mystery, the Essence of Love and that transforming power exists in my life and in your lives.

The Easter Story is saying to us:

- Don't be afraid, the power of Sacred Love is stronger than corrupt governments or nuclear wars.
- Don't be afraid, Sacred Love is stronger than cyber-terrorism or deadly viruses.
- Don't be afraid, Sacred Love is stronger than pollution or climate change.
- Don't be afraid, you are not alone, Sacred Love connects us all.
- Don't be afraid, no matter what you have or haven't done, you are forgiven. Sacred Love is all merciful; it is unconditional and everlasting.
- Don't be afraid, instead be a part of the ongoing creation of God's kingdom of peace and justice.
- Don't be afraid, embrace the changes that are ahead and continue to look for the ways that Sacred Love is working in your life.

This Easter, may you remember the women at the tomb and know they too were frightened, in fact terrified, just before they told a story of new life that started a new religion and continues to inspire both love and courage today. .

Don't be afraid.

May it be so. Amen.