

April 16, 2017 Easter

Acts 10:34-43, Colossians 3:1-4

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Matthew 28:1-10

(With story and some language adapted from my own sermon from 4-24-11 (sources unknown, perhaps David Lose on Working Preacher.com). Don't Be Afraid, by John Bell. Nod to Jan Richardson's poem, Easter Blessing (used as benediction today).)

Alleluia, Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen, Indeed. Alleluia!

Grace and peace to you, Beloved, through Jesus Christ, our Risen Savior. Amen.

“After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.”

Now in some gospels, this Sunday morning trek to the tomb includes spices and a burial ritual, an anointing. But in Matthew's gospel, the women go simply to be there, near their friend and teacher, their Lord. Maybe the reality of the last days is beginning to set in—the meal, the shouts of the angry crowd, his death. Whatever they were thinking, it was brave and risky to go to the tomb where the guards still stood watch. I suspect they just needed to go, like the widow who finds them-self at the cemetery, at the graveside of their beloved at lunchtime, unwrapping sandwiches, needing to be there, to remember, to sit, to pray.

Some years back, just before Easter, the Frogtown Neighborhood on the north side of St. Paul was rocked by murder. Three in one place, younger people.

The neighborhood was reeling: fear and grief. What would come next?

North Emanuel Lutheran Church is just three blocks from where the murders took place.

Though the congregation had had very little contact with those who had died, their pastor back in those days had helped with the funerals. But what next? How could their neighborhood heal?

How does a congregation respond genuinely, honestly, to such heart break, such pain in their community?

Then they began to wonder: What would happen if we moved Easter out of our building? And so they did!

They gathered at the church that Easter morning, and then they took the cross and their hymnals, the bread and the wine, and they walked out the church doors and down the block, down three blocks, to the front of the home where the murders occurred.

The doors and the windows of that home and all the rest were shut tight.

They were scared. Who wouldn't be?

The congregation began to do church: they sang and they prayed.

They read the Easter gospel and proclaimed the Word, they shared the holy meal.

As they prayed and sang, ate and drank, slowly, people began *to peek* out of their windows, *open* their doors, and finally *come out* of their houses, joining them on the curbside.

On a cell phone one man called to another: “Come now, there's a church here in the street, doing church.”

Even members of the families who had lost loved ones ventured out that day.

As the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

They went to the cemetery.

They went to a place that wreaked of death and they found life, new life, unexpected life, resurrected life.

I have just a few points today, and that's the first:

Dear friends, it is tempting to try and live Easter lives never venturing to the grave yard, never peering into the tomb, never crying in the cemetery, jumping right over Good Friday and our own griefs, but new life always, always begins at the tomb, it doesn't stay at the tomb, but it begins there.

Now some tombs are literally grave yards, but others we pass through and may not even recognize as tombs: the battle with depression or anxiety, the waiting for an uncertain diagnosis, justice denied, again.

Can we go on, we wonder, our world wonders, in the face of such pain, such violence?

Yes, cries the angel as God rocks our world.

(SING) Don't be afraid, my love is stronger. My love is stronger than your fear.

Don't be afraid, my love is stronger. And I have promised, promised to be always near.

Those words are: Please, join me...

The angel meets Mary and Mary, at the tomb: "Don't be afraid," the angel tells them,

"Come see the place where he lay, and then..."

"Go, go and tell them, Jesus has been raised from the dead. He is going ahead of you."

And they do go, quickly, and they do tell. Matthew tells us, they left with fear and great joy.

Fear and joy. Isn't that an honest tension that these women hold within their bodies? that they carry along in the tone of their voice as relay the news?

They go with fear and great joy.

That's the second point I hope you'll carry with you today: **That fear and joy are linked, held together, pushing and pulling in our hearts, by their own tension propelling us into new life, Easter life.**

In a week and a half, a beloved member of our congregation, Ann xxxxx, will begin a pilgrimage.

She's walking the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage walked by millions over the centuries.

She'll begin on the French side of the Pyrennes Mountains and then walk west across northern Spain hoping to be at Santiago de Compestela right about Pentecost in early June, and then the Atlantic ocean a few days later.

What a journey for Ann, and not just a walking journey but a heart and soul and head journey.

She's been sharing her plans and inviting our community to ponder our own sense of pilgrimage.

Next Sunday we'll will pray Godspeed for Ann and her journey.

She told me recently, “I’m so excited, and so afraid.”

That sounds familiar, doesn’t it? A lot like Mary and Mary with their honest mix of fear and great joy.

Isn’t that how it is for most journeys, when we’re honest?

Whether we’re embarking on the Camino, or picking a major, or nearing graduation or retirement?

Whether we’re holding on to hope for children, or living with aging bodies, or getting honest about an addiction and the real ways it’s affecting our relationships, our lives?

This journey into new life holds at once fear and joy

A couple of months back, our congregation became a Sanctuary congregation declaring our partnership with immigrants and others to resist unjust immigration policies and offer our building—and really our community—as a place of holy sanctuary for those who face deportation proceedings.

As you can imagine, the decision has awakened us to the privilege many of us take for granted, it has heightened our empathy and advocacy as we widen our congregational family, and it holds at once the tension of fear and great joy.

As Mary and Mary left the tomb that day, there was Jesus, standing there, alive, greeting them.

It turns out, Jesus knows the cemetery—he knows our cemeteries—better than we sometimes can believe:

“Do not be afraid,” he tells them, “Don’t be afraid,” he tells us.

Sing with me: *Don’t be afraid, my love is stronger. My love is stronger than your fear.*

Don’t be afraid, my love is stronger. And I have promised, promised to be always near.

People of God, Easter People, today’s gospel begins in the cemetery, but it doesn’t end there.

It begins in every nook and cranny of our lives and world that is dead, and dry, hopeless, impossible.

It begins in our grief and our uncertainty about what next? Is there more?

But it doesn’t end there.

It ends us with an invitation, or was that a command, to Mary and Mary, and to us, **Go, “Go and Tell.”**

And that’s what I leave you with today:

Go and share what you’ve experienced, how resurrection life isn’t something we must prove,

But rather it’s a promise from our God whose love is stronger than our fear, stronger than death,

And it’s a perspective that we can live, everyday: Risen. Risen. Risen. Amen.