

“Mixed Emotions” Matthew 28:1-10
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April 24, 2011--Easter

We made it! From Ash Wednesday through six weeks of Lent, from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and now here we are. It’s Easter once again! Christ is risen! Alleluia! There is so much joy on a day like today! The celebration of the resurrected Christ! The white paraments! The lilies! The fancy clothes! The trumpet! Joy, joy, joy—just like the women who were the very first to hear the Good News! They arrive at the tomb as the day is dawning—earlier even than those of us who were here for the sunrise service. They probably hadn’t slept much, if at all, the previous two nights since their teacher and friend had been executed. They most likely were still in shock, numb with grief and horror at what they had witnessed. They had perhaps had a low-key Sabbath the day before, quiet, mournful. They arrive at the tomb so early—for what? To keep a vigil? To try and wrap their minds around Jesus’ death, make it seem even more real? I remember in eighth grade, a classmate was killed in an accident, and on Thanksgiving Day, a couple days after her funeral, I rode my bike to the cemetery to visit her grave again. I placed no flowers or tokens, just felt the need to check-in, confirm again that it was all real. Maybe that’s why the women were there at Jesus’ tomb.

Whatever purpose they had I’m sure was quickly forgotten with the appearance of the angel. Let’s picture this a second. Two women, quiet, sad, headed toward the tomb. Suddenly, the earth starts shaking, and from heaven descends this angel, who then goes over to the tomb, rolls the stone away, and plops himself down on it. The guards are so freaked out, they faint. But the women stand their ground, and the angel starts his message with familiar words: “Do not be afraid.” He proceeds to tell them that Jesus is gone, having been raised as he said, and invites them to take a look at the empty tomb before going and sharing the news with the disciples.

How exciting! Christ is risen! Alleluia! But wait—when the women leave, they leave with *fear* and great joy. Fear and great joy. Huh. And then when the women encounter the risen Jesus, he repeats the mandate from the angel: “Do not be afraid.”

A few nights ago at the Maundy Thursday service, I reminded myself and those gathered that as members of the body of Christ we are all part of Christ's story, that even today, we are complicit in the extinguishing of Christ's light in the world. That light has been resurrected today, and we are still part of that story. Now, it might make sense for the women to have mixed emotions about the turn of events at the tomb. How would people react to the news that Jesus who they'd feared enough to kill was alive again? How would the disciples react to the news coming from two women? (In Luke's Gospel, we're actually told the disciples thought the women were telling "an idle tale.>"). What did it all mean?? Yes, there was plenty of reason for fear to be mixed in with their great joy.

But what about now? We should be past that, right? We can just be joyful at the news of Christ's resurrection, no need to fear. If we have been part of the darkness in the world putting out the light of Christ, than it is welcome good news that Christ's light will not go out, that it will keep lighting again and again, that death does not win. There is hope. There is forgiveness. There is grace. All such reasons for joy and for this wonderful celebration this morning! Christ is risen! Alleluia! We can leave the church with great joy and without fear. Or can we?

I'm going to guess that Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary"—who, by the way, we're told in the previous chapter is Mary the mother of James and Joseph—are not the only ones feeling mixed emotions about the risen Christ. I'm going to guess there might be a few here who are feeling some fear mixed in with their joy just as the two Marys did.

What are we afraid of? Maybe we're afraid that if our actions—or lack thereof—are part of the crucifixion of Christ in today's world, than that means our actions need to help be the resurrection as well, and we're afraid we're not up to the task. Maybe we're afraid that the darkness seems to be winning and there aren't enough places of resurrection. Maybe we're afraid of what people might think if we start proclaiming that Christ is risen anywhere other than at church. Or maybe, just *maybe*, we're afraid of the resurrection itself—or of what people might think if we shared that we had doubts about it, or that

we're not really Christians if we can't just believe it, no questions asked or doubts wondered.

I think those are all pretty compelling reasons for us to still be feeling “fear and great joy” about the news of Christ’s resurrection.

But. What phrase is used over and over in the Bible, and twice in this one ten-verse passage? “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid if you don't have the resurrection all figured out. Or if you have doubts that Christ was really raised. Or if you're not sure what it all means. Just a few verses after we stopped reading today, Jesus does indeed to Galilee as promised and appears to the disciples. Matthew writes, “When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.” They have a resurrected Jesus right in front of them, and they doubted. How can we be almost 2000 years distant from that event with stories written well after the fact that don't all match up and hazy details and science-y brains that say it doesn't work and expect to be free of doubt?

Do not be afraid, because the resurrection is about more than just whether the person of Jesus of Nazareth was raised body and spirit or not, what he looked like, where he went, what “really” happened. Despite our common interchanging of truth and fact, there is a difference between the two. The facts of the resurrection are hard to pin down. All four Gospels give different accounts. The truth in the resurrection, though, is that death did not win. Those who killed Jesus thought they could end his message and his movement by ending his life. Jesus was encouraging extravagant love, radical inclusion, breaking social boundaries, over-turning hierarchies, real justice. That message did not, in fact, die with him. Death did not win. The followers of the living Jesus, who thought they were following someone who would bring about the change in world order right then, who were devastated when Jesus died and thought their hopes died with him, then became the followers of the still-living Christ, realizing in the resurrection that the kingdom of God is both at hand and still to come. The message—the Good News—spread. We are part of

that story—that story of resurrection, of life triumphing over death, love winning over hate and fear. It continues with us, today, right now—and it's a story about a God and a love so big that it can handle any doubts or uncertainties or disbeliefs we have. So we *can* leave this church today in a different manner than the women left the tomb. We can leave with no fear, just great joy. Do not be afraid! Christ is risen! Alleluia!