

## *Easter Sunday*

### *“Afraid, Yet Filled with Joy”*

[Matthew 28:1-10](#)

The story of Easter is recorded in all 4 Gospels. Mark’s account (16:1-8) is very simple and ends abruptly. Luke’s version (24:1-12) fills in some details but it still leaves us with many questions about what must have happened in the morning of Easter. John’s story of Jesus’ resurrection (20:1-8) is quite poetic with Mary Magdalene’s personal encounter with the risen Christ. Certainly, it has intimacy but still not much detail.

On the other hand, Matthew, gives us plenty of information about what happened on the first Easter. According to his account, the two women who came out to Jesus’ tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week after Sabbath were Mary Magdalene and other Mary. There were guards at the tomb. An angel rolled away the stone that had been placed to seal Jesus’ tomb and sat on it. And, the angel’s action caused an earthquake. The angel not only talked to the women but also invited them to go inside the empty tomb. The angel also asked the women to break the news of Jesus’ resurrection to his disciples and to instruct them to meet the risen Christ in Galilee. Jesus appeared and talked to the women on their way to the disciples.

One of the common threads among the Easter stories recorded in the three Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke is this: they all tell us of fear. And, the emotion of fear felt by the witnesses of the first Easter is most evident in Matthew’s version. As you might have noticed during the scripture reading, the word “fear” or “afraid” is mentioned 4 times in it. The guards were filled with fear. The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid...” The women left the tomb, filled with fear. And, Jesus said to the women, “Do not be afraid.”

Actually, there are many other places in the Bible where we hear the same phrase, “Do not be afraid” or “Do not fear.” They are the words the angels spoke to people when they appeared. They are the words God spoke to the Israelites through their prophets. We remember the well-known words of God prophet Isaiah delivered to his people: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I

will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10). And, Jesus also spoke the assuring words to his disciples many times.

Why does this phrase of “Do not be afraid” appear often in the Bible? I believe it’s because we are often afraid. In fact, fear is one of seven universal emotions we all experience, and it is a powerful one. We feel it when we are in immediate harm or danger that threatens our security or safety. It is natural for us to feel fear, to be afraid in the face of danger, whether it’s real or imagined. No matter how strong and courageous you are, you can still feel fear because it is a survival mechanism. Being confronted by a perceived threat, we all respond physically and emotionally in various ways.

The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus also had fear. When we consider all the great things Jesus did in his ministry - giving profound teaching and performing astonishing miracles - it is hard to imagine that Jesus was ever afraid. He turned water into wine; He quieted the storm; He walked on the water. He healed the sick; He raised the dead; He fed the hungry; He confronted the people in power, especially religious leaders for their hypocrisy. Truly, Jesus was a man of extraordinary power and courage.

But, as you would remember from our worship last Sunday, Jesus was afraid in the final week of his life. When he went to the garden of Gethsemane to pray, Jesus was “distressed and agitated.” In his own words, he was “deeply grieved even to death.” The Gospel of Mark says, Jesus threw himself to the ground and prayed, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me.” Describing the state of his agony, the Gospel of Luke says Jesus’ sweat became like “drops of blood falling to the ground.” Needing support from his disciples, he had taken three of them to the garden, but they all fell asleep.

This emotion of fear was strongly felt among the first witnesses of Easter. The guards were filled with fear, so the angel told them, “Do not be afraid.” Of course, they had good reason to fear. Suddenly, there is an earthquake, and an angel appears in all glowing white. And then, the large stone that sealed the entrance of the tomb and they have been guarding is rolled away! Matthew describes the state of their fear: “They became like dead men.” They were supposed to guard the dead, but instead, they become like dead in their fear!

Of course, the emotion of fear the guards were experiencing was felt by the women, too. So the risen Christ told them, “Do not be afraid.” The Easter story recorded in the Gospel of Mark conveys to us only fear and silence. But, the Gospel of Matthew tells us something different: there is joy mixed with fear among the two Marys. They were *afraid yet filled with joy*.

The combination of fear and joy might sound strange, but, the more I think about it, I realize that is what we often experience in our lives, when we step into something new. That’s how I felt while I was holding my children and also my grandchildren when they were born. That’s how I felt when I moved to the United States and when I said yes to the call into the ordained ministry. That’s how I felt when I relocated to California and began to serve among you.

“I have not seen anything like this in my entire life.” We have entered a new era. Fear is rampant. But fear comes with joy and excitement about something new.

We cannot escape from fear because it’s part of us.

Easter calls us to conquer, overcome fear.

We suffer in this time of coronavirus, but Easter promises us that we will emerge as conquerors.