

March 31, 2024

“Easter Fears”

Matthew 28:1-10

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

The most authentic note about the Resurrection stories is how chaotic and confused they all appear to be. They differ on details about who saw Jesus when, how many angels were at the tomb, and so on. In fact, in all the stories there is a sense of people just running around, trying their best to come to grips with the impossible having come to pass – and mostly just scared out of their wits as they attempt to do so. So much so, that fear, rather than rejoicing, is really the dominant emotion in the Resurrection stories. And, accordingly, the dominant message of the resurrection appearances is simply this: *“Be not afraid.”*

The disciples, for example, were carrying around one very particular reason to be afraid of the reports concerning the resurrection of Jesus – namely, their conduct leading up to His crucifixion. They could not have behaved worse if they had tried. Jesus washes their feet as an example of servanthood¹ – and they break out into a shabby quarrel over which one of them is going to be number one in the Kingdom². In the garden He asks them to keep watch with Him as He prays – they fall asleep.³ And when Jesus is arrested, tried, and crucified, they are nowhere to be seen – having fled away in fear for their own safety. And above all of these failings stands Peter, who had sworn to Jesus that he would never abandon Him, never deny Him, even go to the cross with Him⁴ – and we know how all of that turned out⁵.

So the disciples had reason to be afraid of Jesus raised from the dead. If Jesus were still dead and buried, then perhaps all their failings towards Him would also stay buried with Him. They could just put it all behind them and go back to fishing, as if nothing had happened. But if He really is risen from the dead, then all of that past business is still out there waiting to be accounted for, still to be dealt with. And what might the risen Jesus say, what might He do, in light of all their past failures in regard to Him?

We all have a checkered past like the disciples, you and me and every human being ever.⁶ Paul speaks of the things he had done that he should not have done, and the things he didn't do that he should have done – it seems to haunt him.⁷ And we all have lists of that sort also. But I think where the past haunts us most is in personal matters – the hurts we have inflicted upon one another and the hurts that were inflicted upon us. Our failures in love, our failures in loyalty, our failures to be for those closest to us what we most wanted to be, what they most needed us to be. Words we have spoken that we cannot now take back; words left unsaid that it is now too late to speak. Understandings that have come too late, which might have tempered our judgments about others back thing. Memories of moments when we were too quick to assume the worst or too ready to put ourselves before others. And all of that woundedness haunting us, all that

woundedness we carry forward from out of the past. Do not we, like the disciples, have much to fear from any honest reckoning with our past? A fear intensified by the fact that we cannot now undo what we have done, we cannot now go back and get it right.

But Jesus, risen from the dead, quickly puts the disciples' fear of the past, as well as our own fears from out of our past – He quickly puts all our fears about the past to rest. *“Do not be afraid,”* He says to His disciples on that Easter day, He says to us on this Easter day – *“Do not be afraid.”* And it very quickly becomes apparent to the disciples that Jesus has not risen from the dead in order to settle scores with them. But, rather, that His rising from the dead is the confirmation of what His death of Good Friday was really all about – Jesus taking upon Himself the past, theirs and ours and everybody's – the sins of the whole world upon His shoulders. Jesus taking upon Himself our past so that it all should be forgiven, all should be wiped clean, all healed by the workings of His mercy.

And nowhere is this more true, more obvious and reassuring, than in Jesus' resurrection encounter with Peter in John's gospel. Indeed, Jesus specifically seeks Peter out to deal with all that has happened in Peter's recent past – Jesus knowing that Peter, of all the disciples, was the one most afraid because of his particular failures. Jesus takes Peter off to the side and proceeds to ask him, three times, the same question: *“Peter, do you love me?”* Each time Peter answers, *“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”* Except that, on the third time, Peter finally understands what Jesus is doing – and he breaks down in tears.⁸ Three questions because there had been three denials on the night of Jesus' arrest. But those tears are not tears of guilt, but of relief and of joy. Because Peter understands that what Jesus is doing with these three questions is not condemning him, but forgiving him. Releasing him from his guilt. Unshackling him from the chains of his failure. Wiping the slate clean of what had happened. *“Do not be afraid of what has happened in the past,”* Jesus is telling Peter, telling the disciples in that moment. And it is what He is telling us still today – *“Do not be afraid of what has happened in the past.”* The resurrection of Jesus means that we are truly and eternally forgiven for our past – truly set free of all that would haunt us, hurt us, constrain us, deform us from out of our past. It means that there really and truly is, as Paul puts it just after his own reckoning with his own past, *“now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*⁹

There is a second form of Easter fear in the resurrection stories. If the disciples had risen to fear the risen Jesus because of their past, the women, who were the first to lay eyes upon Him on that day, faced a fear centered in the present. They go to the tomb early in the morning, oils and spices for a proper burial in hand, worrying only over how they are going to get the stone rolled back from the entrance to the tomb. And then they arrive to find that the stone is already rolled back, that the tomb is empty, and that an angel is greeting them – and they are terrified. They are told that Jesus is risen – but their fear is not removed even when they begin to see the resurrected Jesus. In great part because there is such a strangeness, a hiddenness, to His appearing. They don't recognize Him – Mary thinks He is the gardener.¹⁰ And then they do recognize Him – it is almost like He is there and yet not there. His body is earthly enough that He can eat and drink¹¹; and yet at the same time unearthly, in that He can pass through locked doors and enter sealed rooms¹². And all along this question springing out of both their fear and their excitement – is it Him, is it really Him? Is He really alive? Is He actually standing in front of us in this present moment? Is it Him? Can it be Him? How can it be Him?

The strangeness and uncertainty and hiddenness of these resurrection appearances of Jesus point, I think, to a particular fear that lurks in our minds in our present moment: is Jesus really here with us now, like He promised He would be: *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*¹³ Because there is still this strangeness and uncertainty and hiddenness in our own encounters with the risen Jesus. Sometimes we are sure that He is here with us – brief moments, perhaps, when we feel His presence intensely. But there are also long stretches when we are not so sure – like the women, wondering if His presence with us is real or just something we are imagining. And wondering why, if He is here as He promised, He doesn’t make His presence more clear to us.

And yet, I think it is the very strangeness, uncertainty, hiddenness of His resurrection appearances to the women which provide the strongest assurance to us in this present moment that He really is here with us. For He really was there with the women, standing before them – whether they recognized Him clearly or not. And so we may be assured that He is indeed here with us now, just as He promised, whether we are able to recognize Him clearly or not. Further, if the women, who saw Him face to face on that day, still struggled at first to recognize Him, then we should be neither surprised nor despairing that we experience the same struggle to recognize Him in our own day. But again, this reassurance – as He was with them then, so we can be reassured that He is with us now, and always. For if death cannot keep Him from being with us, then nothing ever shall.

And, also as it was with the women, if the risen Jesus really is with us in this present moment, then in this present moment we need not be afraid – that is what Jesus keeps saying to the women: *“Do not be afraid – I’m really here.”* And so the women’s fear quickly turns to rejoicing as they recognize Him in that moment. And so our fears, whatever they may be in this moment, can also be turned by His presence with us always into a foundation for joy.

Henri Nouwen, wonderful writer on the Christian life, has a story that I think illumines this for us. He tells of attending a bar mitzvah in a New York City synagogue:

*A young man, thirteen years old, was declared adult by his congregation. For the first time, he gave leadership to the service. He read from the Book of Genesis and gave a short sermon about the importance of caring for our environment. He was affirmed by the rabbi and his friends and blessed by his parents. It was the first time that I had witnessed a bar mitzvah, and I was deeply moved — most of all by the parents’ blessing. I still hear the father saying: “Son, whatever will happen to you in your life, whether you will have success or not, become important or not, will be healthy or not, always remember how much your mother and I love you.” When he said this in front of the congregation, looking gently at the boy standing before him, tears came to my eyes, and I thought: “What a grace such a blessing is.”*¹⁴

And then Nouwen adds this profound thought: *“I am increasingly aware of how much we fearful, anxious, insecure human beings are in need of a blessing.”*¹⁵

And that is what the presence of the risen Christ means to us, gives to us, in this present moment, in light of all our present fears: a blessing, His blessing. “*Do not be afraid,*” He says to the women. “*Do not be afraid,*” He says also to us. “*I am with you always, even to the end of the age. And no matter what should come, always remember that I am with you. And always remember, no matter what should come, how much I love you.*” The resurrection means He really is here, really is with us in this present moment among all our present moment fears, and really will never leave our side. The resurrection means that His blessing of love is every present moment being spoken over us. Even if all of this is difficult to see with our eyes, may it ever be a present truth in which our spirits may take comfort, find strength, and continually rejoice.

And, of course, there is one last fear in the Easter story – the greatest fear – the fear of death. On Good Friday Jesus really was dead. Not partially dead, not dead in one way but not in another – no, He was really dead. Crucified, dead, and buried, as the Creed puts it. Dead just the same as the way we will one day be dead and buried. And what then? That is the great fear of death – not just how we shall die and when, but the greater question, the greater fear: what then?

Jesus had been taken down from the cross, placed in the tomb, and a great stone rolled across the entrance. He was dead. Everyone who had seen Him knew that He was dead. And dead is dead, end of the story. Except that on the third day, Easter morning, God raised Jesus up from the dead into life once more. And death, our death, was in that moment defeated. Death, our death, was in that moment overcome – and not just once, in the case of Jesus, but for all of us, and forevermore. Death, our death, no longer needs to be feared – for as Jesus Christ is risen today, so shall we be raised up from the dead on our own future day. “*Fear not,*” He says to us this morning – and as He says in John’s Revelation and will say to us again at the end – “*Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.*”¹⁶ Death, our death, the great fear which stalks our future, is to be feared no longer. For our death, when it comes, shall be swallowed up in His victory – and we, like Him, shall be raised up to live forevermore.

“*You free us from the dread of death,*” wrote the fourth century mystic, Macrina the Younger:

*You free us from the dread of death,
and make this life a door . . .
You open the way to resurrection, shattering
the gates of hell. You slay the one
who held death’s power, give comfort
to those who honor You. You give the holy cross
by which our enemy is slain, by which
our life returns to us abundantly.¹⁷*

*You free us from the dread of death,
and make this life a door:*

I don't know, you don't know – and the Bible doesn't tell us much – about what it will be like actually to die. We'll only know when we go through it. But this we can know now, and this the Bible tells us over and over again: that when we die, it will be with Him by our side. That when we die, it will be into His arms. That when we die, we shall hear Him calling us by name, saying to us on the other side of death, "*Beloved child, arise.*"¹⁸ Arise and live again. Arise and enter the place I have prepared for you. Arise and receive the life, the joy, the peace that shall be without end.¹⁹ "*You free us from the dread of death, and make this life a door.*" "*Be not afraid of the death which awaits you,*" says our risen Lord.

There was so much fear on that first Easter morning. But it wasn't long before all the fears of the women and the disciples were set aside – in that very moment when Jesus spoke to the women, spoke to the disciples, saying, "*Do not be afraid.*" And the fear swiftly turned into joy. The very same words He speaks to us this Easter morning, as we gather before Him this day with all of our fears – fears of the past, of the present, and of the future. He speaks to us those same words: "*Do not be afraid.*" Do not be afraid, because Jesus Christ really is risen today. Do not be afraid, because even now He is turning our passing fears into His everlasting joy.

¹ John 13:1-16.

² Luke 22:24-27.

³ Mark 14:32-42.

⁴ Matthew 26:30-35.

⁵ Matthew 26:69-75.

⁶ Romans 3:23.

⁷ Romans 7:15-25.

⁸ John 21:15-19.

⁹ Romans 8:1.

¹⁰ John 20:11-18.

¹¹ Luke 24:13-35, John 21:1-14.

¹² John 20:19.

¹³ Matthew 28:20.

¹⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World (New York: Crossroad, 1995), pp. 55-56.

¹⁵ Nouwen, p. 56.

¹⁶ Revelation 1:17-18.

¹⁷ Macrina the Younger (ca. 327-379), adapted by Scott Cairns in Season of Beauty: A Lent and Easter Treasury of Readings, Poems, and Prayers (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2024), p. 97.

¹⁸ Luke 7:11-17; 8:41-42, 49-56.

¹⁹ John 5:25.