

John 20:1-18

Easter Dawn, Series C, March 27, 2016

Theme: Do not be afraid!

- I. Fears threaten to consume us
- II. Jesus dispels our fear

INJ What is it that makes you afraid? Terrorism explodes our sense of safety. Political wrangling invades our sense of decency. Maybe the fear that terrifies you is losing your job, or your benefits. Those things can make us tremble because of the impact we will feel in our life. Are you afraid to go to the doctor because he might tell you something devastating? Fear swirls around us in our daily life: fear of flying, fear of some crazy driver, fear of the weather, fear of failure. It can make our life miserable and paralyze us.

On Easter morning, Jesus' disciples and the women who followed him started out afraid. This day was the end of their fear, because Jesus rose from the dead. Our fears also find their match in the living Jesus. At the resurrection of our Lord, God proclaims to us "Do not be afraid!" While fears threaten to consume us, Jesus dispels our fear.

John's gospel relates the resurrection of Jesus in connection with Mary of Magdala. She had been one of those who supported Jesus and the disciples as they went from town to village. Jesus had driven demons out of her earlier in his ministry, and then she followed him and faithfully learned from him. Now she seems to have been leading a delegation of women heading out to finish a proper burial for Jesus.

Her steps out to the tomb were filled with fear. Jesus had been the center of her attention. The events of the last days had happened so fast. Jesus was captured by the temple guards Thursday night and held till morning with the Sanhedrin. They condemned him and sent him to Pontius Pilate to be crucified. Friday morning Jesus was nailed to a cross and killed. Just before the Sabbath rest began at 6PM Friday, Jesus was laid in a tomb.

Was Mary Magdalene afraid for her life as she walked to the garden in the early morning? She had watched violent things happen to Jesus. His followers were also in danger. Was Mary afraid what life would be like now that Jesus was gone? There would be a large empty place there. What would happen next? Fear consumed her.

As Mary approached the tomb, she noticed something out of place. On Friday she had seen Joseph and Nicodemus put Jesus' body inside. They had rolled a large stone over the entrance so no one could get in. She

could see that the stone had been moved! More fears filled her heart and head. Those who had plotted his death must have done something to further humiliate and desecrate his corpse. Someone surely took his body and hid it so that the ladies could not complete the burial rites. This was not at all what Mary expected as dawn broke on Sunday morning. Thoroughly worked up, she ran back to alert the disciples. Fear gripped her tightly as she went.

Later, Mary sat at the tomb in tears. She had returned to survey the damage. Perhaps there was something she still could do. Her fears consumed her as she thought about what had been, what might have been, what could never happen now. She glanced into the tomb and saw two men there. Her grief and her fear did not allow her to recognize that they were angels. She just wanted to find the body of Jesus and embalm it. "I don't know where they have put him." Do you hear the fear in that sentence? Even when Jesus stood there she thought he was the gardener. "Tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Mary's fear did not let her see what was right before her eyes. She only thought of herself, her needs, her plans. She is a lot like us, isn't she? Death had intruded so rudely. People had interrupted so cruelly. The unknown terrified her so thoroughly. Fear allowed her no rest or peace.

It wasn't just Mary who was afraid. John and Peter also acted in fear. They had been hiding from the Jewish leaders who had killed Jesus. What things would those enemies do next? After Mary told them of the apparent shenanigans at the tomb, they raced to see it for themselves. What was going on? Won't they even leave the dead alone? John apparently was a faster runner, but he hesitated to enter the tomb. Peter blasted right in. The door was open. No one was inside. The burial cloths were there, strips of linen with the head covering folded separate. This didn't look like the work of mockers or enemies or thieves. What had happened here? They believed Jesus was gone, but they didn't understand the resurrection as Scripture foretold it.

Their fears are familiar to us. The big one that we face is the fear of death. We cannot avoid dying. It comes because we have done what is wrong. Our conscience pesters us and reminds us and warns us. Surely we will get what we deserve! What will happen when we die? God declares that death comes because of sin. Death is so scary. So final. So unnatural.

There is another fear. We know our guilt. Even a glimpse at our life shows how completely corrupt we are. God demands holiness. Perfection. We are not that. We ought to be afraid of meeting him. His anger rages against us for our rebellion.

The unknown makes us afraid, too. What will tomorrow be like? What can I expect in my future? At my death? When we don't know what will happen we can be a lot like Mary, and Peter, and John. Afraid. Fear consumes us when we think of death, sin and what will happen to us.

Do not be afraid! That is the message Jesus shouts to us this morning. Easter means the end of fear. Jesus has risen from the dead and has conquered sin and death. He makes our future certain and glorious. St. Paul comments that since Jesus is risen there can be no doubt that sins are forgiven. The price was paid in full and accepted by the Father. Jesus lives to proclaim peace with God. Do not be afraid!

Early that first Easter Dawn, Jesus comforted those who were still afraid. Mary was sitting outside the tomb in tears because of her fear. She looked and saw angels. They were there to announce the resurrection. Jesus was not dead. He was no longer there in the tomb. He is risen, just as he said! Mary wasn't listening, but the truth still remained. The other ladies had heard it and were hurrying back to tell the others. Do not be afraid, Mary! Jesus is not dead. Death is not the end for those who trust in him.

Someone came up behind Mary just at that moment. She thought he was the gardener. Mary wanted him to tell her where Jesus' body was. Surely he had hidden it somewhere and he would lead her to the place. All it took was Jesus saying her name. "Mary." Her fear was gone and she recognized him. Jesus is alive! His resurrection removed her fear.

Mary fell down to worship Jesus and clasped his feet tightly. She called him Teacher, for he had told her this would happen. All her fears melted away because Jesus was alive. He was not dead any longer, for he had risen. Do not be afraid! Jesus lives! That is the message we hold on to. Death and sin and the unknown are no match for Jesus.

Jesus comforted Mary by assuring her that everything he had said was true. She need not cling to his feet, afraid to lose him again, for he would never leave her. He would return to his Father just as he had said. He would be with her always, to the end of the age. All Jesus' promises are trustworthy. That is how the fear that still gripped the others would be broken. Tell them, "I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Do not be afraid!

We are here early this morning so that Jesus will comfort us and dispel our fears. His words and his promises are the power of God to accomplish that miracle. Are you afraid of your sin and the punishment you deserve because of it? Jesus has suffered the condemnation for you. He died on the cross to pay the price you owed. Your sins are forgiven. Completely. At no cost to you. Do not be afraid, for Jesus is your Savior.

He proclaims peace with God, to you. He has reconciled you to the Father and brought you into his dear family through baptism.

Can you be sure of it? That is another of our fears. What if the resurrection is a hoax? What if it is a scam and God is just waiting to punish and condemn us anyway? Look at Jesus. He has risen from the dead. He is alive! The Father accepted his payment on our behalf. Death could not hold him. He did exactly what he said he would do. You can trust his words that also declare you justified – not guilty of all sin.

Besides that, look at the evidence before us. The tomb is empty. The burial cloths were carefully laid out. Angels proclaimed him risen. Mary saw him. Many other disciples also saw him, touched him, talked with him. The inspired words of God reveal him alive. You need not be afraid at all! Jesus has risen from the dead.

So sin (all those horrible sins!) cannot condemn you any longer. Cold death is no longer a fearsome enemy. Jesus has changed death by his resurrection so that when we die, we will enter into life with him forever. With sins forgiven we look forward to glory in heaven. Death is but the gate that leads us home. "Where, O death, is your sting?" Death holds no fear any longer, for our Jesus has risen and gone before.

What about our other fears? Finances and the economy, politics and terrorism, the world our children will inherit, and more? Those fears also need not paralyze us. Our risen Savior teaches us that he works all things for the good of those who love him. He knows what is happening with nations and he knows the details of health care and he watches over us in our relationships and in our congregation. He has planned out our future and made it blessed.

When we are afraid, we need to remember this one, most important thing: Jesus lives. He lives to forgive me. He will take me to be with him forever. He lives to calm me down and to encourage me. His inspired Bible words comfort us when we are filled with fear. He says your name in Holy Baptism. Do not be afraid! He gives his body and blood in the Lord's Supper, and it is for you. Do not be afraid. Jesus has risen from the dead!

When the daily pressure gets to you, come near the words and promises of God. Jesus lives. Do not be afraid. Your sins are forgiven. Death is defeated. Heaven is your home. Jesus is with you to the end of the age. Listen to what he proclaims, and be filled with comfort. Fill your ears with God's words again and again. Jesus lives. Rejoice with Mary, who returned to the disciples with this confident and peaceful message: "I have seen the Lord!" We, too, have seen him. The gospel reveals him clearly. Do not be afraid. Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! SDG Amen.