

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Matthew 20:1-11

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them, he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So, they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour, he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house

“Be Not Afraid”

There is – you likely heard it – a message twice uttered. First from the angel, and then from Jesus: “Don’t be Afraid”

This Easter, given our scripture and given our world We might be prompted then to contemplate Fear and the hold it can have on us. Some of us here at church, have, in fact, been doing that this Lent, reading a book called *Unafraid: How to Live with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, by author and pastor Adam Hamilton. Hamilton shares how, in a recent survey of 2400 people, nearly half reported living with a moderate level of fear, while thirty-five percent reported living with a significant amount of fear. *Eighty percent* lived with moderate or significant levels of fear. (Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, p. 4)

Fears are legion; they are many. In his book, Adam Hamilton wrestles with such topics as Crime, Race (or the “othering of people”), Terrorism, Politics, Failure, Disappointing others, Insignificance (does my life really matter?) Loneliness, Change, Fear of missing out, Finances, Aging, Illness, and Dying.

Feeling overwhelmed by that list alone? Does that list suck the wind right out of you? There is a lot it would seem that conjures fear in our lives today.

Fear, of course, is rooted in our brains and in our bodies. Our amygdala fires up, sends a signal of “danger” and we begin to breath more rapidly, our heart races, our blood pressure rises. There are, of course, good and helpful fear responses, fears that serve to protect us.

Encountering a bear, say, in the woods...Fear, and that accompanying rush of adrenaline will help you move, and move quickly!

I think of a dog we once had, an eighty-five-pound labradoodle who would climb into the bathtub every time there was a loud thunderstorm. Adam Hamilton included in his book a picture of his little lap dog in wearing something called a "thunder jacket", something that made his dog feel secure, so I guess our dog Skipper wasn't alone. When we are afraid we need someone or something to hold us close.

I remember a heart-pounding experience once at the Grand Canyon. We simply could not find son Ben, age 16 at the time, who was wearing flimsy looking, trippy looking flip flops and taking photographs with a wobbly one leg was broken tripod right on the edge of the canyon. When we lost sight of him, fear made my mind race. Imagining the worst, I felt sick to my stomach. We paced the rim, my husband and I, calling his name... until suddenly he was there camera and tripod in hand, goofy smile on his face, wondering why it was we were so worked up.

I really don't need to tell you stories so you'll know fear is real. We all wrestle with it at one time or another. Our jobs, our children, the future of our country...so many places for fear to land.

So on that first Easter morning, Matthew tells us the angel – and later Jesus – say "Don't be Afraid". Each likely sees confusion and sorrow and fear, all three, written all over the women's faces. The women, remember, had seen Jesus arrested. They had seen him *die*. Conditions were sorrowful, and definitely scary *before* they made their way to the tomb, where, Matthew tells us, something like an earthquake took place.

The command "Be Not Afraid" echoes not only in the story of Jesus but throughout the whole biblical record. Did you know that God's instruction "Do Not Be Afraid" appears more than a hundred times in the Bible? One hundred and forty to be precise. Listen to Isaiah speaking, long before Jesus time.

*Do not fear, because I am with you;
Don't be afraid, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you,
I will surely help you,
I will uphold you
With my righteous strong hand. (Isaiah 41:10)*

When Mary learned she was to give birth to Jesus The message was "Don't be Afraid." When the shepherds were greeted by an angel chorus The message was "Don't be Afraid." When huge waves rose up and threatened to overturn the boat that Jesus and his disciples were in the message was "Don't be Afraid." At the tomb the first Easter morning it comes again: "Don't be Afraid."

In the DVD video based on Adam Hamilton's book, a woman named Lavonne spoke of how, in her mid-30's, she became obsessed with her health. Was there something wrong with her? There had to be. Many a time her heart rate would increase, she would feel nauseous. There were many trips to the Emergency Room, but they could not find anything. She was having trouble doing anything... getting in the car, going out to pick up her kids...and she had no hope that it would ever get better. Then she saw a doctor who diagnosed her with anxiety, and she received counseling and medication, and she was able to function, breath a little deeper, enjoy life once again. "It takes time," she said "to believe you can get beyond this. It takes time to get to the other side."

There is getting the necessary help. Very important. There is also a role faith has in overcoming fear and anxiety. In faith, we say something counter-cultural: that we are not in charge. In faith, we say "my life is not my own, it is in the hands of God." I think of Reverend William Sloane Coffin, a famous preacher from Riverside Church in New York City, who lost his son, Alex, in his twenties, in a car accident on the Southeast Expressway. Coffin stayed in the pulpit – it was, in fact, how he worked it through. In his preaching following his deep loss, he lifted up a God who "offers minimal protection, but maximum security." In his grief, he placed his son's life, and his own newly sorrowful life, in God's hands, trusting that God would see his family through... that God would, in time, bring them to an "other side" of this deep enveloping sorrow.

As people of faith, we can refuse to be defined by our fears. Surely William Sloan Coffin must have feared he would never feel joy again. With faith, we let go of all false security. We open our hearts and release our fears to God. When we do this, our fear doesn't have quite the same hold on us. Someone recently offered me this quote: "Faith is Fear that has said its prayers." I like that because I know myself. I know that sometimes when something has me fearful, my first impulse isn't always to pray. I want a quicker fix. It can feel better to vent or eat a lot of potato chips, or ice cream. But you know, that really doesn't feel better. Because I am still holding on.

If something is keeping us from praying, releasing our fears to God, we might ask ourselves if we really believe that there is a power greater than us and the fear we are presently feeling...we might ask ourselves also what is being served by our holding on to our fears or by our self-medicating of them.

I see the central image of this particular resurrection story, not the disciples clinging to Jesus' feet and worshipping him but that angel, who, having rolled the stone way, now sits on it! That is such a powerful and audacious image. Everything you thought was so powerful, the Romans and their might, the crowds with their mob mentality, the cross, Jesus death, the tomb with that big fat stone put in front of it to keep Jesus in, to keep us and Jesus apart, that angel sitting on the stone seems to say - Ha! All

that is *not* the end of the story. With God, there is more. There is “the other side’: A stone rolled away, a new day, a wide-open future.

The Easter story plays then on how we think we are in control. Oh yes, for a time the Roman government looked like it was in control. The religious authorities who wanted Jesus out of the picture, for a time they looked like they were in control too. And the disciples...they are just human, human beings who want to insert control in chaotic circumstances. Mary at the tomb wanted to do her job. She is there to prepare a body and blinded by tears can’t see Jesus standing in front of her. In other accounts, the men disbelieve the women, “thinking their talk an idle tale.”

The stone is rolled away, everything is fresh and new... and still, we struggle to relinquish control. This too is part of the story. But God, thanks be to God, is bigger than us.

Be not Afraid. Be Not Afraid. An Easter church will heed these words and have an accompanying sense of wonder. It will not be stuck in the past, but leaning into the future wondering together about where God is moving, what on earth God is doing now. There will be that sense about it -- of possibility, of wonder and delight.

I feel this here when our Sunday school children go out and place kindness rocks around the town, taking God’s love “out there”. I feel it when I come over to Monday Meals and see women dressed in Red Sox regalia for Opening Day serving ball park fare, making hospitality fun. I feel it when new people come to our church and help make something new happen. Over and over in church—a church that is alive that is – we see, we witness new ways of being the church and that is Resurrection life.

Our bulletin cover this morning was drawn by a 15-year-old in the church. Like most teens, he is a mixture of confidence and fear, talent and limitations. The good news of Easter is that the angel sits on the rock and bids us come see that the tomb is empty. What was once a barrier, that tombstone, is now *an entrance An opening, a new beginning*. The barrier is swept away, and love wins.

The good news is all of us are invited into the wide-open shining possibility of a God of love still at work in the world, still making a way where it seems there is no way.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed!

Alleluia!

Alleluia!

Amen.