

"Do Not Be Afraid"
April 21, 2019 (Easter Sunday)
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

A few weeks ago, my eight-year old daughter Ellie took the Iowa Assessments. Do y'all know about the Iowa Assessments? It is a program developed by the public schools to make parents miserable. Every year, starting in third grade, students take a series of standardized tests to track their progress in math, reading, science, etc.

And it all starts in third grade. Ellie is in third grade, so she took the assessments for the first time this year. And she was great! She had a terrific attitude about the whole thing. She was calm, cool and collected.

Her mom? Not so much.

I know, I know. Ellie was the one taking the test. But let me tell you, friends, what it was like for *me*.

It was hard. It was real hard.

Suffice to say I was... a high-strung child growing up. I liked to do well in things. I *really* liked to do well in things, especially school. One time, when I was in second grade, I misspelled one word on a spelling test, and I cried and cried. I told the teacher I needed to go home (she did not think I needed to, smart teacher). Back then, back when I was Ellie's age, I tried to be the perfect student, including the perfect test-taker. And when I wasn't perfect, watch out! Now, to be clear: this pressure did not come from my parents. They were always very good about telling me that I was loved, no matter what... that I didn't have to have perfect grades or test scores or anything like that. This crazy pressure was all from me.

So, a few weeks ago, Ellie is getting ready to take these tests at school. And I'm noticing that I am full of fear, full of anxiety. I felt like that little girl again. I really, really want her to do well, and I'm thinking of all these things she doesn't really know yet, like

fractions, or measurements, or the meaning of the word “anachronistic.” And I’m getting all obsessive, and crazy in my head. Luckily, I had enough emotional sobriety to pretty much keep all my crazy from her (I think); my poor husband was the one to get the brunt of my spinning thoughts.

But the fear was real. The fear *is* real. Even now, I can feel the fear in my bones.

Two long days have passed since Jesus was pronounced dead. Two days since the ripping of the curtain, two days since the darkness, two days since Jesus cried out in agony and exhaustion: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It’s been two days. The Sabbath is over, and a new week is dawning.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary – two of Jesus’ disciples – rise early Sunday morning and head straight to Jesus’ tomb. It’s not clear exactly why they go to the tomb so early – do they want to anoint his body? Do they want to say their final goodbyes? Do they want a break from the others? But whatever the reason, there they are, Mary and Mary – in the darkness, together.

As if these two women haven’t already had enough drama to last a lifetime, when they arrive at the tomb, suddenly, the earth begins to tremble, and then shake more vigorously. *What in the world...?* Rocks are splitting open all around them. The guards at the tomb are falling over like dead men, they are so afraid. The women tumble onto the shaking earth. They cover their heads. *Is this it?* And then... silence. The two women, trembling, slowly uncover their heads. They look up. And there, shining before them, white as snow, blazing like lightning, is an angel – or, at least they assume he is an angel. His face is radiant; his clothes are dazzling. He sits on a large stone. The women stare as their eyes struggle to adjust to the brilliant white light, and they begin to realize that this isn’t just any old stone. This is the very stone that had been blocking the entrance to Jesus’ tomb. This is the very stone that had sealed his grave.

Their hearts pump even more wildly. The women want to run, want to run away from this strange and frightening scene, but the angel speaks: “Do not be afraid,” he says. “*Do not be afraid.*” And, “Go tell the others.”

So they go. They *really* go. They run. And they run. And they run... right into the risen Lord! The run right into their friend, their teacher, their rabbi, their God. “Greetings!” he says to Mary and Mary. And in case they missed it the first time around, they hear the words again, this time from Jesus himself, his voice tender and calm, “*Do not be afraid.*”

And with those words, it’s like something shifts, and suddenly, the women are full of a kind of joy they have never felt before, a joy that bubbles up, a buoyant joy that lifts them to their feet, and gives them strength to go some more: to keep running, and to tell the others.

I am so struck by how prevalent *fear* is in this story. The first time we hear about fear is in regard to the guards – the ones protecting the entrance to Jesus’ tomb. The

guards are so full of it that they tremble and become like dead men. But they aren't the only ones who are afraid. The women – the two Mary's – are afraid, too. And of course they are! The earth is shaking, quaking; but not only that, there is this shining stranger, dressed very oddly, who is hanging around their friend's grave.

But then, what do they hear? First from the dazzling stranger, and then, once they leave the tomb, from Jesus himself in a sort of culminating pronouncement? They hear the words: "Do not be afraid."

"Do not be afraid," Jesus says to the two women. "Do not be afraid." How does he know to say this? How does he know to tell Mary and Mary not to be afraid? It must be that he sees them – *really* sees them. How does the old song go, "Just as I Am"? – well, Jesus sees them just as *they* are: trembling, afraid, anxious. "Do not be afraid," Jesus says to the women, seeing them, truly seeing them – in their fear, in their anxiety and insecurity, in the truth of who they are. Jesus sees them, really sees them, and he loves them still. In Jesus, Mary and Mary are seen. They are known. *And* they are loved.

Someone once told me, "It seems to me that humans have this belief that we can either be known, or we can be loved, but not both." How true this feels to me! I can be seen; I can be known – but then you'll, well, *know* everything about me: warts and all. So there's no way you could love me if you really see me. And if you love me – well, then, you must not really see me.

But Jesus sees us. Jesus sees everything. He sees what we try to hold inside: fear, for sure; and other things, too, things that often accompany fear: shame, anger, grief. Jesus sees everything about us – where we have been and how much pain we hold. He sees how superficial and mean we can be. He sees our pettiness and our insecurities. He sees our loneliness. He sees our broken hearts. He sees our failures, our depressions, our despair about the world and about ourselves and the ones we love. Jesus sees everything about us – he knows everything about us – and he loves us anyway. "Do not be afraid."

The Risen Christ, the Resurrected One, sees us. He sees the trembling child inside each of us, and tells us not to be afraid. And with those words, loneliness turns to being-with-ness. Abandonment turns to found-ness. Darkness turns to light. Evening turns to morning. Winter turns to spring. Weeping turns to dancing. When Jesus sees us, we know that we are found – and that we always have been. "Do not be afraid."

When the Risen Christ sees us – really sees us – and loves us still, we too are resurrected. We too are raised up. There is new life in each one of us, and that life is called forth. It will not be denied. It wells up within us; it gives us courage – deep courage – leading us to do things we never thought possible: tell the truth, share our stuff, work for peace, end old grudges, heal old wounds... the new life goes on and on.

Sisters and brothers, do not be afraid! Today, we are seen *and* we are loved. Today, Christ is risen, and so are we. Alleluia! Amen.