

Trinity United Methodist Church

April 12, 2020—Easter Sunday

“Fear Stops Here!”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8 (NIV)

1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3 and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" 4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 6 "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" 8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

One summer night during a severe thunderstorm, a mother was tucking her small son into bed. She was about to turn the light off when he asked in a trembling voice, "Mommy, will you stay with me all night?" Smiling, the mother gave him a warm, reassuring hug and said tenderly, "I can't, dear. I have to sleep in Daddy's bed." A long silence followed. At last it was broken by his shaky voice saying, "That big scaredy cat."

There are many things in this world that cause fear, especially in today's world. Of course, there is the fear of ourselves getting sick, our loved ones getting sick, friends

and family members. There are the many ramifications of this extended quarantine. Fears about what the world might look like on the other side. There are the economic ramifications that strike fear into many at this time. Many are losing retirement funds in the investment markets. Many have lost their jobs already, and many are in danger of losing their jobs. Will you find another one? What will you do now?

But the thing is we lived in a world of fear before this pandemic as well. Yes, a good deal of that fear is, indeed, media-driven, from all sides of the ideological spectrum. I've heard it said even recently, "Why can't the news media just report the facts, like in the old days?" Well, friends, it's because fear is what sells.

And of course, we've each got our particular fears. Phobias, they call them. It might be spiders. It might be snakes—*"why has it got to be snakes?"* Maybe it's heights; that's one of my fears. I'm a little afraid of heights, and truth be told, I'm also a little afraid of the dark, especially being in dark, old, empty churches at night by myself. I like to think I just have an overactive imagination.

But fear also plays itself out in all kinds of different ways in our everyday lives, whether we realize it or not. It plays out in terms of worry, anxiety, denial, anger. But at the root of all those emotions and many more, much of the time, we can probably trace it back to fear.

Now the thing is, God wired us to fear. All of us are wired with that "fight or flight" response in our human DNA. It's a response that we cannot help, and it's stronger in some of us than others. To be sure, there are times to fear. For instance, if a bear is chasing you through the woods and you're not afraid, you might need to get checked out a little bit. But of course, then there are times to overcome our fear.

I'm most inspired by those who face down their fears, especially those brothers and sisters in the persecuted church around the globe even today. Persecution has been happening for years in areas of Hindu and Muslim extremism, in particular, where whole villages have been murdered and burned to the ground. Pastor Kantheswar Digal and family were forced to flee from their home in the slums of their state capital. He decided to go back one day to check on the house, on the livestock, on former parishioners. When his family pleaded with him not to go, his last words to them were, "Nothing will happen to me. They know and respect me. Nobody will harm me." Well, he was traveling on a bus, and radical Hindus dragged him off of the bus. They beat him repeatedly. They tortured him, demanding that he return to Hinduism from his Christian faith. "I am a strong believer in Jesus Christ," Pastor Digal said. "You may kill me, but I will never become Hindu." They continued to beat and torture him in unspeakable ways, leaving him for dead by the side of the road.

There are some of you who may be here today, who may be watching, who wouldn't consider yourself Christian, and you in particular might be wondering, "What in the world was he thinking? Just do what they want you to do. Just say what they want you to say. Life is more important than that, and fear is the appropriate response. Follow that signal in the brain that says, 'Do whatever it takes to get the heck out of there.'" There are many of you who I've seen here at church from week to week, and you might be thinking the same thing. What caused this man to hold to his faith in Jesus Christ without fear, even without regard for his own life? He said it himself. "I am a strong believer in Jesus Christ."

Jesus modeled faith in the face of fear. It's easy for us churchgoers to go from the "Hosannas" of Palm Sunday to the "Alleluias" of Easter. But in between, Jesus was betrayed by one of his followers, handed over to religious officials who turned his statements and actions into bogus charges of wrongdoing, and then handed over to Roman authorities, who didn't even give him a fair trial for the sake of preserving the peace in Jerusalem. Jesus was given plenty of chances to escape the trouble that he was in before it even began. He was given many chances to defend himself and be acquitted of the charges brought against him, but he didn't. His disciples tried to reason with him. Peter told him that it couldn't, it shouldn't, and it wouldn't happen to him, at least if Peter had anything to do with it.

Why would Jesus allow himself to be put through this? Jesus was fully human. Surely that "fight or flight" response would have kicked in. But Jesus trusted the plan. He foretold it, in fact, three different times, that the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and scribes, and that he must be killed. And each of those times he mentioned one more piece: And after three days he will rise again. You see, Jesus knew ahead of time that death would not have the final answer. That the Father would not leave him in the grave. That life would find a way. That light would shine out of the darkness. So therefore, there was no reason to fear.

If I had to sum up the gospel message for today's world, it would at least start with this message that we hear throughout scripture: **"Do not be afraid."** You may have heard it said that that phrase, "Do not be afraid," appears 365 times throughout the Bible, one for each day of the year. Well, as great as that sounds, it's not entirely accurate. However, the sentiment is true in reminding us that we do not have to live in fear any day of our lives.

In today's reading from Mark, the women come to the tomb. They were worried. They were already fearful, it seemed, and naturally so. Imagine their shock when they looked up and they saw the stone rolled away already. When they walked into the empty tomb. When they saw this young man in a white robe, and they were alarmed. They were astonished. What's his message? I love how the Complete Jewish Bible translates

it. He says, “Don’t be so surprised. I know who you’re looking for. You’re looking for Jesus. But he has been raised from the dead. He isn’t here, and there is no reason to fear.”

Friends, we come today celebrating, and we come ourselves to the empty tomb, looking and searching for various things that weigh on our hearts and minds. For many of us are, indeed, full of worry. Many of us are struggling mightily with anxiety. Maybe the rest of us are just in denial, telling ourselves, “Everything will be just fine.” But friends, the good news is that the message from God is still the same. “Don’t be afraid.” Don’t be so surprised. God knows what we’re looking for. We’re looking for peace, for stability, for health, for safety, for comfort, for joy, for blessing, for hope, for light, and for life. Whether we know it or not, we’re looking for Jesus. For it is only when we believe in the risen and living Lord that we find what we’re ultimately looking for: A reason for living. A way when there is no way. A life when we are surrounded by death. Truth when all we’re being told is lies. Light when all about us is darkness. Again, it is only by believing in the risen Lord that we find hope when fear tries to ensnare us.

Now, don’t misunderstand me. Jesus never promised that by following him, that believing in him would be easy. That believing in him would make your life all footloose and fancy-free. In fact, the women came and they found the tomb empty. They saw proof that Jesus was risen from the dead. And the young man, the angel perhaps, told them to go and tell the disciples that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. That was their mission heading out from that tomb. So what did they do? They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Terror and amazement had seized them.

Now most scholars agree that Mark originally ended at verse 8. In fact, most Bibles in print these days, the rest of the verses in chapter 16 are set aside in some ways in parentheses or brackets with some such explanation. That the original Gospel of Mark ended at verse 8. But if it did end at verse 8, and these women ran away in fear and all the disciples have run away, then who’s left to tell the story? Who else has heard the story, by nature of hearing or reading the Gospel of Mark? You and me. So it seems like we might have a choice to make. Are we going to tuck our tails in fear as well? Or are we going to carry on the mission to go and tell?

In a blog post this past week, my friend and colleague, Andrew Forrest, compared the coronavirus and fear. He points out that we’ve been asked to stay within the safety of our own homes because of how easily this virus spreads from person to person. And he says fear spreads from person to person, but unlike a viral infection, you don’t even have to be physically proximate with someone else to catch or spread fear. It can happen through our communication networks. Ever felt fear after reading a headline or receiving an e-mail? Exactly.

Fear is contagious, but peace is also contagious, Andrew says. He goes on and he talks about firebreaks, those deforested paths that are plowed through forests to keep wildfires from spreading. The idea is that you remove the fuel from these paths and you stop the fire from spreading. And he asks, what if we were to consider ourselves “fearbreaks?” Jesus point-blank said to his followers, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world.” I love it when Andrew says this: “Therefore each of us has the opportunity to stop the wildfire of fear from spreading beyond us.” Let me say that again: *“Therefore each of us has the opportunity to stop the wildfire of fear from spreading beyond us.”* To say, in the name of Jesus, **“Fear stops here.”**

Like a fire, fear needs a source of fuel. And like a virus, fear needs a host. And so when we declare that fear stops here, we bring God’s peace to our circumstances, Andrew says, and our communities, and fear’s spread is stopped.

I would add to that to say that when we declare that “fear stops here,” we bring hope to the hopeless. When we declare that “fear stops here,” we bring light to those living in darkness. When we say, “Fear, you stop here,” we give faith to those struggling to believe, even ourselves. And when we declare that “fear stops here,” we give love to the brokenhearted.

You see, fear will always seek to have its way. That’s why we have to stay centered in our spiritual disciplines of prayer, of scripture reading, of fasting and journaling and regular worship, however we can, especially during these times. And especially engaging in our spiritual disciplines together in our homes. Our kids catch on to what we are doing and feeling as parents more quickly than we realize. And likewise, they will catch on just as quickly when they see us sharing with them what we’re reading in scripture and asking them what they’re reading in scripture, reading scripture together and praying together.

Fear will always seek to have its way. But if verse 8 was the original ending of Mark’s gospel and the women did run away in fear, obviously fear didn’t end up winning. Because the truth of Easter is so great that it still got out. So in a world where fear continues to spread like wildfire, where we *catch* fear so easily, what if we took the precautions today, *now*, each of us, to boldly declare in the hope of the empty tomb, that **fear stops here and now?**

To borrow from Franklin Roosevelt, what is there to fear but fear itself? What greater hope is there than to believe in the Son of God who has been raised to life to sit at the Father’s right hand, from where he will come again to judge the living and the dead? If we believe that he died to save us from our sins and we confess that with our lips and we go and tell *that* instead of fear—friends, there’s no reason, then, to fear at all, no matter *what* might come our way.

Christ the Lord *is* risen today. And therefore, **fear stops here**. Thanks be to God!
Amen.