

Sermon: No Fear Needed Easter Sunday April 9, 2023 Matthew 28:1-10
Rev Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON

Happy Easter! Easter Sunday is always a big celebration, with piano and organ and bells and vocals, with flowers in the chancel.

At the heart of the service is the gospel story. Today its Matthew`s version of Easter morning, the story of the resurrection according to Matthew. It is a story so important that we normally surround it with music and song and fanfare and symbol. We enfold the Easter good news with good things.

Matthew`s version of the Easter story is a bit like that. He surrounds the Easter event with all kinds of flash and flare. It is such an awesome event that he surrounds Easter with wonder.

Mark`s gospel tells the Easter story in a sparse and spare way. Mark`s gospel is all action. The narrative keeps moving so there is no time for narrative flourish. Christ is Risen. Go and tell. The end.

Matthew`s telling of the Easter good news is a elaborate spectacle, with an earthquake and shaken guards and moving stones and an angel with a face like lightning, who makes a dramatic entrance.

In none of the gospel narratives is the resurrection event itself described. Just as we surround the Easter story with music and celebration, so the gospel writers surround the resurrection event with action and wonder.... but the Easter moment is not portrayed. It`s too big to be described.

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Something similar happens in other places in Scripture. In Isaiah 6, when the prophet gets a glimpse of the Holy One of Israel, sees God enthroned in heaven, the Holy One is not described. The earth shakes, awesome angelic seraphim sing, their voices making all things tremble, and the throne and robe of God are described in all their glory. There is smoke and fire and awesome wonder. All that surrounds the Holy is described but the One on the throne is too awesome to be captured in words.

In the Life of Pi, the author Yann Martel tells the South Asian story of Krishna and the milkmaids. Krishna appears as a cow herd, and he is handsome and charismatic. All the milk maids in his circle are in besotted with him. In the evening around the fire Krishna dances with all the milk maids, each and all at the same time. And if ever a milk maid thinks that he is hers alone, he disappears from her arms.

This story from another tradition reminds us that somethings are too wonderful to be held, contained, captured, comprehended... they elude us when we think we have them possessed or figured out...

Resurrection is like that. Easter is too big to be contained, depicted, or explained. Even the gospel writers do not attempt to describe the Easter event. They surround it with story, symbol, and wonder.

Let's look at one of the wonders that Matthew mentions: *An angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.*"

While Mark has a young man dressed in white sitting by the empty tomb, Matthew speaks of one awesome angel. His face is like lightning. He dramatically descends. He hurls the great stone aside from the entrance of the tomb. His awesomeness makes the guards fall and become like stone in fear.

And his first words to the two Marys who come to the tomb early is "Do not be afraid,"

Do you know what the most repeated Biblical phrase is?

It's not a rule, or a command, although it might sound like one.

It's found in both Old and New Testaments. The phrase is repeated 350 times. It's "Do not be afraid." Fear Not. Don't be afraid. Perhaps we are fearful, afraid enough that we need to hear these reassuring words 350 times: Don't be afraid.

One of our recent moderators of our United Church, Rev David Giuliano used the phrase *Do not be afraid* as a repeated mantra during his 3 years as our denominational leader. In his travels he found that congregations and congregants were often afraid- afraid of the change in the world around them, afraid of their own diminishment, afraid of that which imperiled our world... Churches were making decisions rooted in fear, driven by a sense of scarcity based in fear -so he called for courage and faith and mission and hope. Do not be afraid. Our Moderator was then also battling cancer himself which may have made his words resonate even more: Do not be afraid.

Fear drives us to all kinds of destructive things. Fear the stranger and the refugee and so turn them away. Fear those who live and love in a different way, those who self-identify in a way we don't quite understand and so demonize them.

Fear can also paralyze and deenergize, keep us from moving, acting, following Jesus in hope, living love...like the guards by the tomb quaking on the ground, fear can stop us cold. The women at the tomb are called to go follow the Risen One. Do not be afraid. Go.

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The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John."

"Don't be afraid, Mary. For you have found favor with God and you will bear a son..."

"Don't be afraid, shepherds. I bring you good news of great joy that shall be to all people."

"Don't be afraid, Joseph, take Mary as your wife."

"Don't be afraid," the angels say.

And now on Easter morning, in a shadowed graveyard, a dramatically dazzling angel says again:
Do not be afraid.

It sounds like a command. "Do not be afraid" But, what the angel says about fear is not a command. It is not an emphatic requirement. If we are fearful sometimes, we have not failed. The words *Fear Not* are a comforting word, an invitation to embrace the good news. There is nothing to fear. You need not fear. "Perfect love drives out fear" writes the apostle John. The angelic words are an invitation to see the world and all of God's people with love.

Christ is risen. The tomb is empty. He lives and is with you even to the end of all things. We need not fear. Happy Easter! Amen