

Don't be afraid!

It feels like the mantra with which to begin every day these days. Certainly it is the message I want to convey to you – the message I hear loud and clear from scripture over and over again – the message that resounds this Easter morning in the words from Matthew's angels at the tomb: *"Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised."*

This is good news – it is a key phrase in all moments of tension and drama in the biblical witness and it always heralds the restorative and empowering word of courage that is the very essence of the gospel. It is good news in a stream of overwhelmingly sad, unsettling and disheartening news. This is good news for us all.

The women in Matthew's narrative are afraid with good reason – there is the earthquake, a stone-rolling angel with a face like lightening and clothing so white it is painful to look upon! A terrifying scene that causes the guards for faint dead away leaving the women alone to hear the angel's words of comfort and courage. Leaving the women to see the place where Jesus had lain and then to go tell the disciples that he had been raised from the dead and was waiting for them in Galilee. Leaving the women to respond with a mixture of fear and joy.

Maybe that is the really good news of this Easter morning for us this year – the encouragement of those who know our fear and joy. Isn't that our reality right now – lives tinged by both fear and joy? We are living in uncertain times. We fear what may happen to those we love in a dangerous world even as we celebrate the blessing they are in the world. We may have economic fears and still experience the joy of sharing what we have with those in our circle of care. Perhaps we are fearful about the fate of a loved one struggling with illness – remembering too the joy in the gift that person has been to us. We may have fears about the future of our congregation in these days when we are unable to meet together – yet there is great joy in our care of one another as we reach out to proclaim and live the gospel. We likely have fears about the future of the world – what will happen when the pandemic is over? – is going back to the way it was desirable even if it is

possible? And in the midst of those real and pressing concerns we experience the joy of banging pots or heart-filled flags or smiling eyes shining above masked mouths or exchanges left on the doorstep – many, many joys...

It is striking that in the text from Matthew we read that the announcement of resurrection doesn't take away all the fear that the women have. Rather, it enables them to keep faith amid their fears, to do their duty and share their good news in spite of their anxiety. This is courage – this is good news. The gospel gives us the ability – the courage – the embodied hope of Christ to keep ourselves grounded amid the tremors and enables us not just to persevere but even to flourish when life is difficult.

“Do not be afraid.” Announced by the angel and repeated by Jesus, this message gives us hope. While there is undoubtedly much to fear in our mortal lives, the resurrection of Christ creates the possibility for joy and hope and courage and so much more because it changes everything. In the resurrection we have God's promise that life is stronger than death – love is greater than hate – mercy overcomes judgment – and all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient. They are real and palpable and perhaps painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality.

Fear and joy – despair and hope – doubt and faith... we all experience these in the ups and downs of our lives but we have heard the resurrection promise that joy and hope and faith will ultimately prevail. Have courage. Don't be afraid!

Our gracious God is a God of new life and never-ending possibility. The good news of Christ's resurrection does not take away our fear – as much as we wish it might – but it does offer us courage and hope in an uncertain world that roots us in the sure promise that God's final word is one of light and life and grace and mercy and love and peace.

Do not be afraid.