

Don't Be Afraid

Sermon by Bob Arbogast

Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan

April 29 & 30, 2019

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20

Sermon

On Easter Sunday, when the angel of the Lord cracked open the tomb of Jesus, the earth shivered with joy. But the watching guards shook with fear. The sight of the angel overwhelmed them. The angel was like an open window, and the pure light of heaven was streaming through. No wonder the guards collapsed. Who wouldn't?

Who wouldn't? Mary Magdalene, apparently. And the other Mary. Of course, the angel did speak to the two of them. "Don't you be afraid," the angel said. It was fine for the guards to crumble. But the two women, they had work to do.

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First, they had to come and see. Then they had to go and tell. So the angel pointed the women to the empty tomb. And they had a look. Then the angel pointed them to the disciples' hiding place. And they were on their way.

THE TWO WOMEN WERE FILLED WITH JOY. And no wonder. They'd been thinking that everything was over. They'd been thinking that Jesus was lost, gone for good. But no. "He is risen." That's what the angel said. "Risen from the dead." Hallelujah! Let's have a party!

But the women were also afraid. Not collapse-on-the-ground afraid. Not shaking-in-their-sandals afraid. But afraid enough that, when Jesus met up with them, the first thing he said after "hello" was "Don't be afraid."

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So, what were they afraid of? Not Jesus. No. When they saw him, they ran to him. When they reached him, they grabbed ahold of him. And while they held on to him, they adored him. No; they were not afraid of Jesus.

SO, WHAT WERE THEY AFRAID OF? Were they afraid that they misunderstood the angel? that maybe Jesus was still dead? Were they afraid that the disciples wouldn't believe them? that their story would sound like nonsense? Or, when they saw Jesus, were they afraid that he would leave them again? that they all would be orphans?

Or maybe were they afraid because they had just bumped into something inconceivable? Could that be it? Already Jesus had raised people from the dead: the widow's son, the little girl, and Lazarus himself. Those were signs of God's powerful presence in the midst of the ordinary, human world. But this was different. This was resurrection. And resurrection is more than a sign.

RESURRECTION COMES AT THE END. Because resurrection is a new reality, a new-creation reality. So somehow, by the resurrection of Jesus, the new creation had begun. And somehow, by the resurrection of Jesus, the two women had come face to face with the new creation here in the midst of the old creation. No wonder they were afraid. How could anyone know, how could anyone imagine, what that was going to mean?

Apparently it means the two women have a job to do. And Jesus reminds them. "Go tell my brothers," he says. And he encourages them: "Don't be afraid."

Apparently it also means the church has a job to do. At the end of the chapter, Jesus says, "Go tell the world." And he encourages the disciples and us. He gives us all the reason we need not to be afraid—not to crumble and collapse. He says—listen to this; this is so important and so profound—he says, "I am with you always."

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Now here's something extra special about that. The way Matthew puts it in Greek "with you" is right in the middle of "I am." I — with you — am. So there is no distance between Jesus and his disciples. There is no distance between Jesus and his church. There is no distance between Jesus and any one of us.

IN JOHN'S GOSPEL, JESUS SAYS, "I won't leave you as orphans. I will send the Spirit to be with you." Now, hold that over here, while you think about Genesis 1. In Genesis 1, the Holy Spirit is present at the very beginning of creation. The Holy Spirit moves over the chaos as light emerges from darkness. The Holy Spirit moves over the chaos as all things emerge from nothing.

In the same way, at the beginning of the new creation—the new creation that starts with the resurrection of Jesus—at the beginning of the new creation, the Holy Spirit is with us, always with us, moving over the chaos and the darkness. The Holy Spirit is with us, always with us, as we come to new birth, as we ourselves become new creations in Christ. And the Holy Spirit is with us, always with us, as we follow where Jesus leads us. And because the Holy Spirit is with us, we can follow without being afraid. We can follow without crumbling and collapsing in fear.

NOW, THERE IS PLENTY TO BE AFRAID OF IN THIS WORLD. There's plenty to be afraid of when it comes to our kids and when it comes to our own future. There's plenty to be afraid of in schools and in places of worship and in prisons. And there's plenty to be afraid of when we're loyal to a better country because we're serving the only true King.

What are you afraid of? What scares you the most today? Think about that now. What are you afraid of?

NONE OF US LIKES TO ADMIT THAT WE'RE AFRAID. We want to be tough. And sometimes we need to look tough. But all of us are afraid.

We're afraid that we won't measure up to what life in this world demands of us. We're afraid that we're going to stumble and fall and be left behind.

All of us are afraid. We're afraid of dentists and dogs and demons. We're afraid of poverty and pain. We're afraid of alcohol and Alzheimer's. We're afraid of being judged and rejected. We're afraid of loneliness. And we're afraid of being nothing but a disappointment. We don't want to disappoint our families or our friends. More than anything, we don't want to disappoint Jesus.

So all of us are afraid.

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But listen. In the middle of your fear, listen. Jesus says, "Don't be afraid. I won't leave you as orphans." Listen. In the middle of your fear, listen. Jesus says, "Don't be afraid. I'll send the Spirit to you." Listen. In the middle of your fear, listen. Jesus says, "Don't be afraid I — with you — am. Always."

IT'S A NEW WORLD. It starts with Jesus. And it spreads to all of us. It's a new world. The territory is uncharted. And it's rugged. It's a new world. But we're never alone. You are never alone. So don't you be afraid.

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Glory and thanks be to God,
Father, Son, And Holy Spirit.

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