

What a beautiful sight

Menno Mennonite Church

Easter: April 17, 2022

Purpose: To pronounce the greatest invitation of Easter: Do not be afraid.

Message: As people of faith and hope, we are invited to see Hope beyond every fear because of Easter.

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10 (I will read); 1 Corinthians 15:51–57 (please read)

Synopsis:

There is little doubt that fear is present in our lives; indeed to live without it represents a profound risk. That's why we instill, selectively, levels of fear for young people in our lives. Our world, our living frequently causes us to fear.

Yet what is striking in Matthew's account of the resurrection is the level to which fear does not play a role, or, for that matter, even death. The women here are said to be going to see the tomb, not to undertake the work that the other writers give them. They are met with the constant greeting: do not be afraid, and this time it actually works. They are given the vision to see and know God's saving hand at work in this moment, perhaps even anticipating it in ways that we can only admire. Through it all, we are invited like the women to look and not to fear.

evernote:///view/31369896/s249/134f7bb4-193e-439a-9f8a-7065a6812ec1/bddd0c0c-3b5c-41d5-91ff-682c8826082c

evernote:///view/31369896/s249/8f68b328-409d-4f5e-b4c3-810fec987a40/2c0e829c-0ff5-4023-bfa0-a4ebb1ad1a14

Matthew 28:1–10 (NRSV)

28 After the sabbath,
as the first day of the week was dawning,

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

² 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.

\
³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.

⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

⁵ But the angel said to the women,
“Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.

⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised,
as he said.

Come, see the place where he lay.

⁷ 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.”

⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy,
and ran to tell his disciples.

⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!”

And they came to him, took hold of his feet,
and worshiped him.

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them,
“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee;
there they will see me.”

The sign of a good story is that it is hard to keep it straight. Each telling and re-telling crafts and burnishes the tale to suit the teller and the audience, each with their own emphasis and twist on the essential nature of the happening. Like my brother and I telling the story of the time where we tumbled out of the sled and went most of the way down an icy slope with me as the toboggan on the bottom, giving me a fairly memorable facial scrape, who did and said what and who was responsible for what varies based on the teller. But it happened and it was indeed epic. It is one of the stories we tell to entertain when the meal has long gone cold, even if we are going to argue the details (which, most of the time, is the point of telling the story in the first place).

Easter is the same way. Not only is it the best possible story ever told, it is one where the telling blends across the gospel accounts, with the goings and comings becoming a general blur. Just like with Christmas where we need to stop and think to remember who tells about the Magi—Luke or Matthew, the four accounts of easter range wide and far between them. Christ is alive and rejoicing happens is the take home, and we can forget that the 4 tellers fail to agree on the number, identity or intent of the women on their way to the tomb, the presence or absence of outsiders in the garden, the nature of possibility of governmental involvement, or whether or not their was a stone, or indeed an earthquake. And this is when at least 3 of the gospels are using a joint source according to academic analysis. While the important part must be kept here—that Christ has risen indeed—there is also much to be told in looking at the details as they do find them.

But that does not mean the variations aren't telling. We are not used to Matthew's story; so much so that we read it quickly without hearing the contrasts that are here. The women go not to take on a task, or to wonder at the stone baring their access. They go to simply see the tomb. There was no to-do list or fear or anything; just to see. The obvious question is why this contrast to the other ways of telling the story. Perhaps after days of being locked in the room with the disciples they just need to get some air. Perhaps they wanted to see if it was all, indeed real, this nightmare that they have endured now. Perhaps it was the beginning of the ritual of coming to see the place where the body was as a matter of veneration of the master. All of this and more is indeed possible.

But there is a far more interesting and intriguing possibility: what if they went to the tomb to answer the question is it empty? What if they wanted to go and see if it was true, this promise that they had heard so often—on the 3rd day I will rise from the dead? What if they

believed--perhaps incredulously and half-heartedly—but believed all the same? They had seen him teach; they had seen him heal; they had seen him now crucified and now they wanted to see if the tomb was empty just like he said? Seeing, knowing, encountering is a major theme in Matthew as time and again the gospel goes out of its way to speak of what was seen and known and heard. They wanted to see the tomb where he had been laid, the tomb that he had told them would be empty—and lo and behold it was. Their belief is narrated and explained by the angel validating all that had been said. So it was not a huge surprise then to encounter Jesus on their way back to tell the others. They know who this is at first sight—their risen friend, and much more importantly, their risen Lord.

How we wish our vision of Christ was so clean and keen. After all these centuries of telling the story, living the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, we can struggle to know the resurrection, struggle to feel the impact of what it means to encounter the news that death, the way of the world, has lost its sting. We can struggle to know it fully and live it completely because it can seem like such a long time ago and far away. We know the story so well, and have lived it so long, but do we know its fully import? Dare we entertain the complete impact of what it means to have Christ alive and calling us forward to meet him in the world. Perhaps we have seen too much of war, struggle, injustice and fear to understand that the world has changed, and will change again. Perhaps we have become so accustomed to the telling of the story that we neglect the meaning of the story. Perhaps we lose sight of the magic of “he is risen” because we so long to see truly the fullness of what that means beyond our own presently limited sight.

Helen Keller is likely the most famous sightless person ever. Deaf and blind for all but the first 19 months of her life, she was often looked to as a writer and thinker on these issues well before such things were even as commonplace as they are now. In 1933 she wrote a piece for the *Atlantic Monthly* where she entertained the question of what she would do with a 3 day respite from being blind. Her she writes in aching detail of confirming the touch of the silver bark of a birch, and the rough textures of pine and nature, to put images with the visions she has known through her hands. She imagines much more fully the notion of examining the face of her teacher and friend Annie Sullivan, filling in the blanks that were so meaningful to life. In musing at this, Keller reflects on the meaning of having sight. She writes: “*It is a great pity that in the world of light the gift of sight is used only as a mere convenience rather than as a means of adding fullness to life.*” Keller saw with her courage to explore much more than many of us

do, living therefore in the fullness of life that that brought. She remarked once "Active faith knows no fear, and it is a safeguard to me against cynicism and despair."¹ How often do we let ourselves be blinded by simply failing to see and know the world for the light that is present and is there rather than the eyes of faith that have seen the Lord? We do not always live with our eyes open. We do not always expect to see easter at work around us. Sometimes we are afraid of what happens when God takes over, and that fear can keep us from truly seeing the ways God is at work, where the light of this days shines most brightly.

The classic opening line for the appearance of the holy is "do not be afraid". It is the absolute necessity of any encounter because we are so given to fear. Both the angel and Jesus say this. What is remarkable is that in Matthew's account the admonition works for once. The women hearing the news move from fear to worship. The disciples in their turn get up and do what they were told to do: go to Galilee. They see the tomb as they were taught to see it—empty and inviting possibility.

All through his essential life and living with them Jesus has shown them a different view of the world—one that sees the light for what it is. He showed them a world of Beatitudes where poor in spirit, the meek, and the persecuted are the ones who are blessed, not the ones pitied. He showed them a world in which an eye for an eye was not the rule, but rather the extra mile, and cloak in addition to the stolen coat. He showed them a world in which love of neighbor was right and proper, but love of enemy was even more necessary and absolute. Jesus showed those who walked with him the world as God intends, where the lame are healed, and the challenges of life do not have the last word. He showed them that the world is not ultimately what it might so often appear to be, that within the world of the kingdom, fear has no place. For even now, he was showing them that swords and governors and high priests and powers, even death does not have the final word. This is the vision and the hope of Easter. It was then, and it is now. That does not change.

There are some who are afraid here, though. The soldiers, the governor, and priests who had placed these events in motion are described as terrified. It is a startling thing to see all of the idols in which you have trusted to keep life in order roll away, leaving an empty, gaping hole. It can be startling to contemplate an empty tomb, even when we have visited it often. We have all been there when what seems solid in our world is taken apart, and it's not fun. Resurrection does not always hold promise for us. Sometimes it can look an awful lot like death because it opens

possibilities we may not be ready for. We may resist that would be resurrected in us precisely because it requires us dying that little bit first—dying to the way things have been, dying to the certainty that the world is as easily and predictably cynical as we so often make it out to be.

Easter makes it clear that none of these oh-so-solid powers and principalities of world, that we both oppose and hold dear do not have the final word keeping Jesus dead and buried and the kingdom of God at bay. They never have. They never will. We need that promise to remind ourselves that the idols that keep us in their thrall now are not permanent. We need that warning to us that when God is at work, all things are subject to rebirth and change, even that which we treasure most. We need the gifted sight to see the world for reality of the resurrection that is present.

Greetings! Do not be afraid. It is shortest, most poignant Easter sermon imaginable. We are quick to fear that the empty place before us, whatever it is, is a place of death. But Easter is here so that even on days absent the flowers, hymns, and proclamations, the sermon remains: Do not be afraid. In other years, the gospels give us room to hide, doubt, and be afraid. Not Matthew. The promise of Easter is the promise that, as Stanley Haurwas puts it, *“Jesus draws us into a world so compellingly true that we do not have time to be afraid.”*

Jesus has taught us how to see the world, and we no longer need to fear. For impossibility need not any longer determine our living. Death does not have final power over our life. That is good news indeed. This is the journey that begins today for some, and continues on for many, many others. Easter has come and now is the time to journey forth, past our fear, into the places that God is calling us to worship in awe, serve in humility, to live lives unafraid.

ⁱ Cited in When Death no Longer determines our living by Kimberly Clayton ([When death no longer determines our living](#))