

Easter Day
April 4, 2021
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud
Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts together be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

They were afraid, Mark tells us—those women who had gone to the tomb, so early on the morning after the Sabbath. The tomb was empty and *they were afraid*. I guess so.

I am deeply grateful to be speaking to you on this Feast of our Lord's Resurrection in 2021. This is not the celebration that we had hoped for this year. But, the tomb is empty! Jesus has risen! And so we celebrate with joy. Do you remember last year? Easter Day 2020 was not the feast we had hoped for, either. And yet, the tomb was still empty and Jesus was still risen, and so we celebrated as we could, and with joy.

I have given up predicting how this world-wide pandemic will proceed. There is plenty to do to rise to the medical, cultural, and practical challenges of each day, so I don't have a lot of time to wonder about what our celebration will look like in 2022. But I do know this—the tomb will still be empty, Jesus will still be risen, and we will still celebrate with joy!

Happy Easter! I hope to be able to say that to many of you face-to-face after this service, as you drive through the parking lot of the church to receive communion, another thing we had never thought of before. But between now and that unique sacramental moment, I want to think for a few minutes about the emotion of this great feast.

They were afraid. Fear is an emotion that all of us have, I think. But I also think that many of us older than about five years do our best to hide it. Just as soon as we are able to develop empathy—to recognize the emotions of others, we want to look good in each other's eyes. Perhaps because fear feels so bad, we don't want others to think that we have it?

But these months of global pandemic have laid our emotions bare. I know I am not the only one who has been often afraid in the past 13 months. I have been afraid of catching the virus. I have been afraid that you will catch the virus. I have been afraid on behalf of those who have suffered with it. More lately, I was afraid I would have to wait months to be vaccinated—and then when I was able to get the jab—I was afraid of what reaction I might have! And now I am afraid that people who haven't yet been vaccinated will be irritated with me for being ahead of them in line.

Fear is not the only emotion that I have felt in the last 13 months, for sure—but it has been right up there with the happiness, sadness, disgust, anger, and surprise that psychologists name as the six basic human emotions.¹

In this past week, the holiest week of our church year, we have heard again our most important story—the story of Jesus' Passion, that is, Jesus' great love for God and humanity that led him to both Cross and empty tomb. It is a story told with reference to every human

¹ This is just one of several theories, but Paul Eckman's six basic emotions are widely accepted. Read more here: <https://online.uwa.edu/infographics/basic-emotions/>

emotion, and all the combinations of them—joy and despair, *terror and amazement*, jubilation and anxiety. We observe and celebrate the events of the Passion every year, and because we have empathy, we feel those emotions again. So, we are not surprised to hear the end of Mark's version of the story.

Mark tells us that the women were alarmed to see a young man in a white robe who gave them instructions. They were to find Peter and the other disciples and tell them to go on to Galilee—that is, to go home—where they would see Jesus. That kind of foreshadowing would suggest that the women would get going, and then next verses would describe their journey home. But, no. Mark ends his account with a *non sequitur*, that the women ran out of the tomb and *said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid*.

And that is the end of Mark's Gospel. If you have a Bible open in front of you, you will read a few verses after that word afraid, and then a long footnote. The footnote explains that the earliest surviving pages of Mark's manuscript end with *for they were afraid*. The next few verses were added in later centuries, presumably after the new Christian Church grew up enough to have some empathy with other faith traditions. We didn't want to be fearful and we didn't want others to think less of us because of our fear.

But surely this year, we can all agree that feeling fear is a perfectly normal reaction to being in a situation that we have never experienced before. I don't think less of Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome for feeling afraid. They were in the middle of a situation that had never happened before to anyone! Going to visit the tomb of a loved one was a usual thing to do. They expected to be sad, indeed they were sad and anxious as they went on their way. But when they got there, the world changed for them—for all of us—and they were struck by terror and amazement. Knowing that they were smart enough to be afraid makes me trust them—those three women who lived more than two thousand years ago.

The emotions of the story make perfect sense. That is why our empathy is engaged every time we read it. But it is fascinating that scholars agree that Mark's story of the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus ends with the fear of the first ones who knew that Jesus had overcome death. Why would Mark choose to leave them and us in that fear?

On this happy morning, I have been referring to the Passion of Jesus as a story. Of course, we read it out of a book. The Passion is a narrative. It has characters, a plot, and themes—and so, in that way, it is indeed a story. But it is also our history. And even more than history and story, it is our life. The Passion of Jesus gives life—eternal life to each one of us—each one of God's beloved. The events we read in the Passion did not merely happen to those people in that day. The living love of Jesus happens to each one of us in our own day.

And so, the fear of the women is our fear, too. We are not merely feeling empathy with them. We too, are afraid of how this news of the risen Jesus is going to affect us. It is all well and good to read of an historical figure who was a nice guy. We are interested that he might have somehow made a miracle, and turned water into wine, or fed thousands with a couple of sardines. We are touched by his compassion and moved by his anger. But if he continues to live, even after a public execution and burial—if he still lives, if he is still going on ahead of us, then our lives are changed, too. And change makes us afraid.

We are feeling the emotion that humans feel in the middle of a situation they have never encountered before. And we wonder what to do! The man in the white robe told the

women what to do—they were to take themselves, and all of their emotions with them, and run to catch up with the fleeing men. They were to find the disciples, who by the way were in the grip of their own fear, stop them, and tell them this scary, incredible story, in order to change them. They would go home. And what would happen then? No one knew! No wonder they were afraid.

Mary, Mary, and Salome are in the midst of a life-changing transformation. Jesus has died and Jesus has risen. They knew what life was like when Jesus was alive. And because they had known others who died, they could guess what life would be like when he died. But what will it mean to their lives that Jesus has overcome death and the grave and still lives?

Human lives are full of emotion, it is true. But our lives are also full of action. Mark doesn't tell us what the women did after they sat awhile in their fear. But it isn't too hard to puzzle it out—obviously, they did tell the story. We know they told the story, because we know the story. And it isn't too hard to figure out why Mark doesn't document their telling. Mark knows that this is more than a story to tell, it is a life to be lived. He got us to the climax of the Passion story, but he is not going to give us the denouement—because how we live in Christ is how the story will live out.

If the story of the Passion is the story/history/life of each one of us who knows and loves Jesus, then it is up to each one of us to live in the fear—really, to live **out** of the fear of this astonishing, transforming change. Death is not the end. The tomb is empty. Jesus has gone home ahead of us.

In this strange year of the triple pandemics of virus, racism, and violent reaction, we all know fear. The question is, how are we going to live with it? Better—how are we going to live **out** of the fear? Our bodies will die, we cannot deny it, we have seen it far too often, especially in the last year. Our bodies will die—but death will not win. Death never wins. When the tomb was empty, and Jesus went on home ahead of them, we knew. Love wins.

And that is the fact that changes our human lives forever. Jesus is risen, and calls each one of us into a transformed, risen life in this world until we get to the next.

We are afraid. The tomb is empty. Jesus has gone on ahead of us. And so we follow Jesus in his way of Love. And we live.