

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown WI**

“Do Not Be Afraid”

Rev. David K. Groth
Easter Sunday, 2020

“Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid’” (Matthew 28:10).

This Easter is unlike any we have seen. To be sure I’m delighted to be here with you . . . delighted to be together, as we sing and listen and pray together. It’s been a long time. And yet, it’s a little strange isn’t it? It’s better than being sequestered at home, but still, you are sequestered to your cars. St. Francis of Assisi preached to birds. I’ve been preaching to an iPhone 11, and now I get to preach to Buicks and Chevy’s and Toyotas. And I’m glad to do it! Still there’s a little fear in the air and you all know why.

Have you accidentally drawn too close to someone and watched how they backed away from you? I did and I still feel bad about it. A worker at Pick ‘n Save had her back turned to me, and I said excuse me, can you tell me where . . . As she turned around, she backed up. I had forgotten, and was about four feet away, not six. It felt like the north pole of one magnet pushing against the north pole of another. It felt like fear . . . reasonable, justifiable fear.

You know that first Easter had quite a bit of reasonable and justifiable fear too. They thought he was the Messiah. They thought he would be the king. But now there would-be messiah and king is dead, and they have nothing to show for it other than some unfinished work at the tomb. Maybe his opponents will turn their attention on them, his followers. And what of those guards? Will they be trouble?

As they draw near the tomb, suddenly there was, “megas,” “seismos” the Greek says, great seismic activity – an earthquake. That’s a fearful thing to begin with, and this one seems to have been provoked by the descent of an angel! His appearance: like lightning. There are no words, even inspired words, that can capture the scene. The text says guards “tremble” with fear. Again, the word tremble is a form of “seismos.” The guards are all shook up and become like dead men. Note the irony: those assigned to guard the corpse become like corpses.

Paying no attention to the guards, the angel speaks directly to the women: “Do not be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.” That is, he wasn’t just play acting his death. He was really crucified until dead. But now, “He is not *here*, for he is risen! Look for yourselves. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead and he will meet you in Galilee.” The angel has fulfilled his assignment. The message has been delivered. Now it’s up to the women to act on it.

Matthew says they departed “with fear and great joy.” Notice, before it was only fear. Now, because of the news, there’s also joy mixed into the fear. Maybe that’s where we’re at today. We’re anxious and afraid, and have reason to be, but there’s also joy mixed into that batter. We have heard the angel’s announcement, and we know that is Good News for us too! He is the first fruits of the Resurrection. His Resurrection will become our own. He will give his victory over sin and death to us, and in fact already has. So today, it’s a mix of fear and joy.

In and of itself, fear is not a sin. Fear serves its purposes. Because of fear we run out of

burning buildings. Because of fear we avoid bad habits. Because of fear of the law we drive slower. Because of fear maybe your knuckles are also dry from all the handwashing. Because of fear you too are checking in on family members. Fear serves its purposes and is not a sin.

However, mismanaged fear can lead to sin . . . for example when we drink to become numb to the fear. Mismanagement of fear can make us sullen, morose, and ill-tempered. Mismanagement of fear can turn us into control freaks, clamping down on our spouses and children. Mismanagement of fear can make us doubt and deny God's promises.

Once again, I watched the movie the Ten Commandments last week. So many memorable scenes. What a bad apple that Dathan was! But this year of Covid-19 the Passover scene also stood out, with the foggy pestilence creeping under doors like mustard gas.

To convince Pharaoh to "let my people go," God is forced to inflict a series of plagues on Egypt. Water turns to blood, the land is inundated by frogs, gnats, then flies. Cattle are killed. Crops are ruined. Yet Pharaoh keeps hardening his heart. He refuses to listen. Finally, the worst plague strikes the nation, when every first-born son in Egypt dies. It's an awful, awful thing. But can you see how God is punishing sin with sin? Remember, years earlier Pharaoh had ordered all Israelite boys to be killed at birth. (That's when Moses was floated down the river as an infant.) Now Moses stands before Pharaoh trying to knock some sense into the man. But Pharaoh will have none of it. His obstinance becomes a national disaster.

However, God spares his people. The blood of a lamb, spotless and without fault will serve as a substitute. God tells his people to paint the blood on their doors and then gives them a shelter in place order. He quarantines them. Exodus 12:22, "None of you shall go out of the door of the house." In the night, a plague strikes the whole nation of Egypt, but not them. They huddle in their little huts and chant and pray and eat unleavened bread and they listen to the horrific cries of the Egyptians. They are safe because of God's mercy, and the death of the lamb, but they're also afraid. All that death. All that grief.

Exodus 12:30 "there was not a house where someone was not dead." Until recently, it was hard to imagine a national tragedy on that scale. The coronavirus is nowhere near that deadly, but it has reminded us how vulnerable we are to death.

Pharaoh finally relents and the people make a hasty exodus. Before, it was Pharaoh who kept hardening his heart. After the plague, he grows obstinate. But now, God hardens Pharaoh's heart, who assembles his army and horses and chariots and takes off after the Israelites. Can you imagine the fear of the Israelites? They are sitting ducks out there. In front of them is the Red Sea. Behind them the army of Egypt.

You know how it goes. God's people cross on dry ground, but the army of Pharaoh is drowned. Still the fears don't end. Now in the desert, their fear gets the better of them. "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die?" For forty years they wander fearfully in the wilderness. Even on the cusp of crossing into the Promised Land, still they are fearful. After all the Lord had done for them! Remember what the spies said? The people living there are GIANTS, and we felt like little grasshoppers before them!

The point is fear has been and will always be part of the life of faith. And so, this day too, we have a handful of fear tossed into our faith. But this day too, we also have the blood of the Lamb, a Lamb spotless and without blemish, whose blood saves us from death. We know that. We believe that. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away our sins.

Still, we contend with our fears. What does this mean? It does not mean you are irrational or stupid. It does not mean you are immature. It does not mean your parents did a poor job of raising you. It does not mean you are a closet unbeliever, or a second-rate Christian. And this is important: It does not mean God loves you any less.

Remember how fearful the disciples were? To save their own skins they fled from him, denied him, abandoned him. And yet, what does he say to the women outside the tomb? “Do not be afraid; go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” He calls them: “My brothers”. You know, there’s abundant grace and love in both those words. They are still family to him. He still loves them in spite of their fears. “My brothers.” They still belong to him and he to them. Remember what he called his ancient people who were so fearful? “My people.” Our fears do not disqualify us from the faith. In fact, there is no faith without fear. How can we revere God without a healthy fear of his might and holiness? How can we celebrate the resurrection without fearing sin and death and the evil one? How can faith comfort and sustain us if there’s no fear or anxiety?

Still, Jesus tells us today, “Do not be afraid.” Some things are worth fearing, but not this, not his death and resurrection for you.

Fear not, because God is not out to get you. He does not want to condemn you or punish you or get even with you.

Fear not, because God sent his Son Jesus to redeem you, to forgive you, to cleanse you of all sin, even that of which you are most ashamed, or that of which you are not even aware.

Fear not, because on the cross he already paid the just penalty for all your sin.

Fear not because he gives you the forgiveness of sins through Word and Sacrament.

Fear not, for where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation. Because death could not hold him, death cannot keep its grip on his children whom he loves and has forgiven. And that is what you are. You are his baptized children. He has laid claim on you. He has written his name on you with indelible ink.

True, many of us have not been able to receive the Lord’s Supper in the last few weeks, and that just doesn’t feel right. It feels kind of empty. But remember God doesn’t give his grace in only one way. The Book of Concord reminds us “God is superabundantly generous with His grace” (Smalcald Articles III:4). First through the spoken Word, by which the forgiveness of sins is preached to all nations. Second, through Holy Baptism. He also gives grace through the Power of the Keys . . . [that is through confession and absolution]. We cannot and will do the Lord’s Supper over the internet, but if there’s some sin that is particularly distressing to you, you can certainly pick up the phone and call me and we can go through individual confession, and you will hear the Lord’s absolution spoken to you, with the extra bonus of my dog barking at the neighbor’s cat. Remember, there’s consolation and relief also to be found with Christian friends. You can still do that.

It may be some time before we can gather to eat and drink his body and blood, but don’t be discouraged. “God is superabundantly generous with his grace!”

So, dear people of God, hear again the words of Jesus. “Do not be afraid.” For the crucified Christ is risen. He loves you, forgives you, and has and will save you from death. In spite of your fears, he thinks of you as “my brothers,” “my sisters.” You are family to him. Therefore, “Do not be afraid.” Amen.