

Easter Day  
Matthew 28.1-10  
March 23, 2008  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Famous last words:

Pilate said to [the chief priests and the Pharisees] , “You have a guard of soldiers; go, make [the tomb] as secure as you can.” Matthew 27.65

“Make [the tomb] as secure as you can.” Just when Pilate thought he could put the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth behind him, the religious leaders showed up on his doorstep again, the day **after** Jesus died on the cross. They were there to express their **fear** that Jesus’ disciples would **steal** His body to make it **look** like He had risen from the dead, as He had predicted.

Pilate had had more than enough of their company in the previous couple of days. He never again wanted to hear the name “Jesus of Nazareth” from their lips **or** his wife’s. So he politely, distantly, told them to do whatever they wanted, to take the matter into their own hands and assign their own guards to police the tomb. “Go – make the tomb as secure as you can.”

Pilate had his own fears. Chief among them was worry about displeasing Caesar, because he **knew** the consequences were awful. He was a typical person in power, afraid of losing it.

Pilate had plenty of company in the fear department. Some folks who aren’t familiar with the Bible assume it’s filled with two dimensional people without any depth of feeling or hint of humanity about them. If **you’ve** been thinking that, though, you’re wrong! The Bible is filled with people just like us: real because they’re **far** from perfect and real because they feel all the emotions that we do.

Here are some of the other characters in St. Matthew’s story about Jesus’ Passion, death and resurrection whom we’re told or whom we could well imagine were afraid: Jesus, in the Garden the night before His death; His friends, who saw men coming with swords and clubs to

arrest their Master; the high priest's slave, whose ear was cut off; Peter cowering in the courtyard, afraid of being pegged as Jesus' friend; Judas, when his betrayal hit home; Simon of Cyrene, collared to carry the cross; the centurion and other Roman soldiers who realized they had just crucified God's Son. Fast forwarding, there were the men securing the tomb as best they could early Easter morning who were so frightened by the appearance of the angel that they "shook and became like dead men" (Matthew 28.4). Plus there were the two women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who managed to stay conscious but must have been pretty rattled themselves when the earth shook below and an angel descended from above, then rolled back the tombstone, sat on it, and struck up a conversation with them!

The experiences of all those different people are far removed in time and place from our own lives. But we **do** know what fear feels like: how the bottom drops out of our stomach, how our skin tingles with apprehension, how our whole self, both body and soul, is on high alert for something painful about to happen. It almost doesn't matter whether we're afraid for ourselves or someone else: the physical, psychological effect is the same. We may fear sickness, the end of a relationship, the death of a dream, the loss of a job, the departure of a loved one, the arrival of the bill collectors. In our fear we can ball ourselves up like a rolypoly bug, protecting ourselves with armor all 'round **and** rendering ourselves unable to move. In our fear we can entomb ourselves.

In St. **Mark's** Gospel, the grieving women who went to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning were so frightened by the message the young man sitting inside gave them about Jesus' resurrection, that they:

...went out and fled from the tomb, for **terror** and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were **afraid**.

Mark 16.8

Fear made them mute. They entombed themselves in silence.

Here's the difference between St. Mark's and St. Matthew's version of the story: the women in both cases are fearful, but in St. Matthew's telling they are also joyful. He says:

...[T]hey left the tomb quickly with fear and great **joy**, and **ran to tell** his disciples. Matthew 28.8

Hurrying away to tell the Good News, their joy exploded even further because Jesus met them on the Way. Translators haven't done justice to the word that shows up as "Greetings!" It's not a simple, "Hi, there ☺," it's more like, "Be glad! Rejoice! Celebrate! Dance to the music!" And then, just like the angel had, Jesus tells the women, "Don't be afraid," because fear is all over their faces.

"Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Matthew 28.10

By calling the disciples "my brothers", Jesus is sending the message that He hasn't disowned the whole sorry crew for deserting Him in His hour of need. It is for them, for their sins, for their fears, for their frailty, that He died on the cross. He didn't die for them because they **deserved** it. He died for them because He and His Father and their Holy Spirit **loved** them, warts and all. He died for **us** not because **we** deserve it, but because God also loves **us**, warts and all.

St. Paul has said, "Perfect love casts out fear." Our love isn't perfect but God's is. On the first Easter Jesus commissioned two women to fly on the wings of the morning to tell a world deadened by sorrow and frozen in fear that He had been raised from the dead, and that in so doing He had won forgiveness for sinners, joy for the sorrowing, strength for the weak, acceptance for the outcast, healing for the sick, eternal life for the dying.

This Easter morning our Lord Jesus commissions us to do the same, to tell the world in one way or another, through word **and** deed, "Christ is risen, alleluia! He is risen indeed, alleluia!" We heard Pilate's famous last words, "Go, make the tomb secure as you can," and we laughed. We know there was no way in the world to secure the tomb against the resurrection.

One wise person put it this way: “How do soldiers secure the world against miracle?” (Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, p. 77.) We know the answer: they don’t.

Has fear made you curl up inside like a roly-poly bug? Have you tried to make the protective tomb of your life secure as you can? It won’t work, you know. You can’t wall God out. God’s love will find you wherever you have hidden in fear. Hear Good News on this Easter Day: There is no reason in the world to doubt God’s love for you.

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave Him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (Romans 8.32)

Tell that Good News to yourself, to somebody else, to a whole series of somebodies, this Easter season of fifty days. Tell them, “Come and see.” Remind yourself and tell them that Jesus says, “Do not be afraid!” Hear Him call you, hear Him call them, “Brother,” “Sister.” Hear and share Jesus’ famous last words from St. Matthew’s Gospel:

“...[R]emember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”  
Matthew 28.20

Amen

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