

“Overcoming Fear”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church — Indianapolis, Indiana  
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Mark 16: 1-8  
Isaiah 25: 6-10

“They were afraid.” Not exactly the sentiment which first comes to mind for this morning, is it? We’re all dressed up in our finest outfits. The lilies decorate the sanctuary. We are in a joyful mood, for Christ has risen from the dead. “They were overjoyed” would seem more appropriate, wouldn’t it?

Yet, here it is, right at the end of Mark’s retelling of the resurrection story: “. . . and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Why would Mark end the greatest celebration of the Christian year in fear? Is that an appropriate emotion for this holiest of days? Why don’t we read from another gospel account of this event, so we don’t have to deal with this apparent contradiction? As we will see, to be afraid on Easter Sunday is probably the most natural feeling to experience, and without Mark’s Gospel, we might never have fully understood why that is the case.

To begin, there are questions regarding whether or not what I read this morning is indeed the actual ending to the Gospel of Mark. If you look in your Bibles, you will notice that there are two additional endings after verse 8. These were both likely written some three hundred years after the original text was completed. Why? Well, I wouldn’t be surprised if someone also thought it was unusual that the end of the good news of Jesus Christ would be as we have read it today, and decided to spruce things up a bit. But for this morning, let’s just consider the text as if it ends at verse 8.

For Mark, this story begins on the day when Jesus lay in the tomb. The three women — Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome — went out on Saturday evening to buy spices in order to anoint the body of their teacher and Lord. The Sabbath was over, and they decided to wait until early the next morning to go to the tomb. Mary Magdalene knew which one it was, because she was there when Joseph of Arimethea laid Jesus’ body in the new tomb hewn from the rock (15:47). She would lead the women there, and they would care for their master, even in death, as was the Jewish custom.

What must have been going through their minds as they walked to the cemetery early that morning? Could they face the visual reminder that their teacher was actually dead and gone? How would they get into the tomb, since the rock which covered it was too heavy for them to roll away? And how would they now go on living, once they saw their hope dead in the grave?

What greets them when they arrive is startling, to say the least. The stone which they had worried about was no longer covering the tomb — it was standing to the side, allowing free access inside. Who would have done that? Has someone

entered the tomb and stolen the body before we arrived? This is the right tomb, isn't it?

Then, as they stoop to enter the tomb, they are even more startled. They are greeted by a young man, dressed in a simple white robe, sitting to the right of the place where the body had laid. But the body was not there! Their master was gone! Someone had indeed robbed the tomb. They could not even give Jesus a proper Jewish burial. Who is this man sitting in the tomb?

“Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him.” Do not be alarmed? They arrive to find the body of Jesus gone, a man sitting inside, and this man telling them that he has been raised. This man knows their master, and confirms for them that this is indeed the correct tomb. Their fears must have been even more heightened than when they first arrived.

“Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Did Jesus tell them this before? Maybe it was the night of his arrest, in the upper room, when he told Peter he would deny him three times and Peter could not believe it. That indeed did happen, and perhaps they remembered Jesus saying something about going ahead of them once he was raised up (14:28). Now, they were supposed to go and tell the others, including Peter, about what they had seen at the tomb of their master: the stone was moved, a young man was sitting in the tomb, and Jesus' body was gone.

“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement has seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8). Have you ever been seized with fear and terror? Your throat becomes tight. Your heart begins to beat faster. Sweat begins to form on your brow, and your hands become all moist and clammy. Your mind starts to race, and all of the worst scenarios run before your eyes. It is an unforgettable experience when fear and terror seize you, one which you would rather not go through ever again.

That is what the three women felt after their encounter with the young man at Jesus' tomb. William Willimon describes the deepest fear the women - and we ourselves - experienced that morning. “If Jesus, the one who was crucified by colluding government and religious leaders, the one who had been crushed by the forces of evil, if this Jesus was now raised, now vindicated by a mighty act of God and raised to new life, if God has stepped in and mightily reversed the whole march of time and history and raised Jesus, then the women knew enough to know that everything in the world had been turned upside down and that nothing would ever be the same again” ([Pulpit Resource](#), Year B, 22). That realization would be terrifying indeed.

Fear is a powerful emotion. If we fail to acknowledge it, it can have an incredible influence over us. Indeed, I see many examples of fear being a paralyzing force in the world today.

- I see government leaders so fearful of losing their next election, that instead of making decisions in the best interest of the whole, they make decisions in the best interest of the powerful few.

- I see people so fearful of the “other” that they isolate themselves in neighborhoods, schools, and enclaves to be protected from perceived threats.
- I see men and women so fearful of living into a new reality of grace and forgiveness, that they hang onto grudges, anger, and hatred, refusing to give change a fair chance.

Fear is such a powerful force in our world today, that if we are not careful, it, rather than faith, can become the guiding force in our lives.

But the fear which we encounter on Easter should not paralyze us; it should transform us. For when we realize what Easter means and how it changes our world, then we are not only seized with fear, but more importantly, we are also seized with amazement. We are amazed at who our God is. God is more powerful than our largest machines and deadliest weapons. God is more loving than our harshest enemies or our deepest human relationships. Because, in the end, God did not let death have the final say. In the end, God is free and on the loose, for nothing will hold God in bondage. Easter should not paralyze us with fear; it gives us the courage to overcome our fear with hope and faith.

There is no mention of Jesus appearing to the women or to the disciples in Mark’s account of Easter morning. Instead, they are left to believe in the testimony of others, of witnesses in the days, weeks, and months to come that Jesus was raised from the dead. They are left to believe through faith, a faith which could only be a gift from God.

Will we allow the fear of Easter to transform us, or will it paralyze us? When we are faced with the challenges of faith, will we accept that God is loose, or will we be scared to act in faith? Will the church witness to this amazing testimony of God’s power and might, or will it be frozen in fear, scared to share the good news with those who most need to hear it? What will we do? How will we respond to this frightening, amazing event?

It’s okay to be afraid on Easter. If you’re afraid, that probably means you have a deeper understanding of who God is and how God is a part of your life. If you have a tinge of terror, that probably means you recognize the significance of this day. If you sense your heart beating faster and goose-bumps forming on your skin, that probably means you know this is not our world in which we live, but the world which God has created. That world has been redeemed and made new this day for all eternity.

“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them.” It’s okay to be a little afraid on Easter. But it’s not a fear which paralyzes. It’s a fear which spurns amazement, awe, and faith. Go and witness to this amazing thing, so that fear might be overcome by God’s life-giving faith.

Alleluia! Amen.