

*Fear and Great Joy*

**Matthew 28:1-10**

John Breon

There's a lot of fear in this section of Scripture. The Roman guards were so afraid of an angel that they fainted dead away. The angel told some women not to fear. Still, they left the tomb with fear and great joy.

I've been thinking about our fears. What scares us? What scares our friends? How does the good news of Jesus meet those fears?

When's a time that you've been really scared? One time when I was maybe five or six, a group from our church went out to one of the church member's farm to pick pecans. While the adults were picking up pecans, some of us kids walked into the woods. After a little while, I suddenly felt lost. I didn't know how far we'd walked or where Dad was. I panicked and started crying. The older kids led me back. We probably weren't more than 100 yards away. Soon I saw where the cars were parked and I was o.k. One of my friends said, "You were just faking crying, weren't you?" I tried to save face with my friend, but when I felt lost I was really scared and I really cried.

Another time, some years later, we lived in town but rented a nearby pasture to keep a few calves. It was maybe four blocks away from our house. One evening, I walked over to feed the calves. As I left, I decided to run back to the house. It must have been around football season, because I thought I'd act like I was running a football play. I got in a stance, shouted a cadence (I was by myself)—"Down! Set! Go!"—and took off. I hadn't gone twenty yards when some friends of mine who'd been hiding beside the road jumped out, yelling and scared me to death. That fear was a mixture of being startled and embarrassed at the same time.

Sometimes I'll remember close calls or near accidents I've had and I'll relive the sinking, fearful feeling that comes with wondering what might have happened.

There's plenty to be afraid of in this fallen world. We may fear loss or rejection and being alone. Maybe we fear confrontation or violence. It may be failure or foolishness that scares us. We might fear illness, injury, or pain. Maybe we live with a low-grade, persistent anxiety. Often we fear change,

moving into the unknown. Even when change is good and we know we need something new and different, we resist it and take comfort in what's familiar. We might fear loss of control, loss of power. That seems to be the fear the Jewish leaders had and why they asked for those Roman guards to be stationed at the tomb of Jesus. The fear of dying, of death, includes many of our other fears.

Let's hear the resurrection story again and see what it does to our fears. The risen and living Lord Jesus can handle what we're afraid of and can give us great joy.

Mary Magdalene and another Mary go to see Jesus' tomb at dawn on the first day of the week. There are at least two significant things about these women. One is that they provide continuity between Jesus' ministry, death, burial, and resurrection. These women were with Jesus in Galilee. Healed and given new direction in life by Jesus, they followed him and supported his ministry. They were present at the cross. They saw Jesus die. They were there when Jesus was buried. They saw his tomb and his lifeless body placed in it. Now they come to the tomb and see it empty. In a little bit they will see Jesus himself, alive. The story of Jesus' resurrection is not just tacked on to a gospel that could stand without it. The resurrection is a vital part of the story. Without the resurrection, the gospel is incomplete. The presence of these women at each stage helps tie it all together.

Another significant thing about the women in the resurrection story is that they're the first witnesses of the resurrection and the first to tell the good news that Jesus is alive. In a culture that devalued women, the last have become first (John Hiigel, *Partnering with the King* 269). God has a way of coming to outcasts and using the most unlikely people to fulfill his plan.

Matthew tells us a little earlier that the religious leaders and the Romans posted guards at the tomb. They wanted to keep anybody from getting in or out. What were those officials afraid of? They said they didn't want someone to steal the body and spread a false resurrection story. Even the idea of Jesus being alive again threatened their power and security. They couldn't deal with the changes that would have to happen if Jesus

were alive and proven to be in the right all along. So they posted guards and later bribed the guards to squash the story of the resurrection.

But when the two Marys arrive at the tomb there's been an earthquake. The stone that sealed the tomb has rolled away and an angel sits upon it, shining like lightning. The guards posted at the tomb shake with fear and fall down like dead men. They passed out from fear—fear of the earthquake and the angel's terrifying splendor. The guards who were sent to make sure Jesus' body stays in the tomb are paralyzed with fear. They were supposed to guard the dead, but now they fall down and become like the dead.

The angel says to the women, "But don't *you* be afraid. Let those tough Roman soldiers shake and faint, but not you women of faith! I know you're looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has been raised, just as he said he would." Here's another connection with the rest of the gospel. The same Jesus, who lived and taught and healed and was crucified, is the One who is raised from the dead.

The angel's message challenges our fear.

*Don't fear—come and see.* The women are invited to see the empty tomb, the sign of Jesus' resurrection. God meets our fears with an invitation to see a new reality. The empty tomb alone didn't prove Jesus is alive. It just demonstrated, "He is not here," not "He is risen." Still, the empty tomb indicates that something unusual happened. The Roman guards saw the empty tomb but drew a different conclusion and told a different story about it.

There's also the invitation to see Jesus himself, to encounter him, to know him. The angel tells the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised, that he will go ahead of them into Galilee, and they will see him there.

Our fears give way to joy when we meet the living Lord for ourselves. We can face our fears, admit our fears and live and love and serve anyway when we know that Jesus goes before us to lead us. When we experience him going with us to sustain us. When we trust that he surrounds us to protect us from permanent harm.

The Lord invites you to come to him with all your weakness, all your sin, all your fears. He'll be there. You can know him and know that all the junk we hoped would stay dead and buried does stay dead and buried because Jesus doesn't stay dead and buried. He's alive! Don't fear—come and see.

*And, don't fear—go and tell.* The angel tells the women to go and tell the disciples the good news that Jesus is no longer dead, but he's been raised to life. God meets our fears by giving us a mission. We don't have to fear that our lives have no meaning. This new life in Christ has purpose. Others need to be set free from fear. Others need to hear the good news. Others need to meet the living Lord. And God chooses to work through you and me to help them.

The resurrection of Jesus launches new creation. In the original creation, part of the purpose of human beings is to know God, to represent God, to reflect God's glory to all of creation. We chose not to do that and started worshiping created things instead of the Creator. So we gave up our purpose and power to things in the world that were supposed to help us serve God and we started serving those things instead. Now God comes in Jesus to rescue and restore us and give us back our purpose of knowing and representing God. We experience new creation and through the Holy Spirit the living Lord lives in us to make us all that God intends us to be.

So the women hurry away from the tomb *with fear and great joy*. What a mixture of emotions, but what else would you expect? Strange things are happening. It's confusing. Yet they've been told that Jesus is alive. That's cause for rejoicing.

How can fear and joy come together in our lives? Sometimes we get scared and then realize there's no danger, so we laugh with relief. What we were afraid of wasn't real or didn't happen. That helps us understand fear and joy mingling. But it's not the same as the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus really had died. The loss and pain were real. The fear of life without him was real. But now, fear becomes wonder and awe that bring rejoicing.

The women trust the angel's word and move out in trembling, joyful obedience. And suddenly, Jesus himself meets them and greets them on their way. They fall at his feet and worship him. Joy in worship overcomes

fear. Jesus repeats the angel's message: "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they will see me." It's interesting that Jesus refers to his disciples as "brothers." They still belong to him, they're still part of his family, even though they had failed and deserted him. He wants to restore them and continue his mission through them. We don't have to fear that our failures are the end. Jesus still has a mission for us. There's joy in going with our Lord in working out his purposes in the world.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis captures some of the fear and joy, the strangeness and celebration of the resurrection. Lewis imagined other worlds and then thought, "Suppose the Son of God became incarnate in one of them. What would that be like?" Since he liked stories with talking animals, Lewis imagined Jesus as the great lion, Aslan. In this story, four children from our world are drawn into another world called Narnia. They eventually meet Aslan, who allows himself to be humiliated and sacrificed on a Stone Table in place of a traitor.

Two of the children, the sisters Susan and Lucy, watched Aslan's execution from the shadows. Then the evil ones who slayed Aslan went off to continue their war against his followers. But the girls stayed behind.

The rising of the sun had made everything look so different—all the colours and shadows were changing—that for a moment they didn't see the important thing. Then they did. The Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan.

"Oh, oh, oh!" cried the two girls rushing back to the Table.

"Oh, it's *too* bad," sobbed Lucy; "they might have left his body alone."

"Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?"

"Yes!" said a great voice behind their backs. "It is more magic." They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself.

"Oh, Aslan!" cried both the children, staring up at him, *almost as much frightened as they were glad* [emphasis added].

"Aren't you dead then, dear Aslan?" said Lucy.

"Not now," said Aslan.

"You're not—not a—?" asked Susan in a shaky voice. She couldn't bring herself to say the word *ghost*.

Aslan stooped his golden head and licked her forehead. The warmth of his breath and a rich sort of smell that seemed to hang about his hair came all over her.

"Do I look it?" he said.

"Oh, you're real, you're real! Oh, Aslan!" cried Lucy and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses.

The girls still wonder what it means and Aslan explains a bit. Then he starts romping and chasing and playing with them around the hill top. "It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia; and whether it was more like play with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten Lucy could never make up her mind" (Collier Books edition, 158-61).

We may still be asking, "What does it all mean?" What difference does it make that Jesus died and was raised to life?

Do you feel lost, cut off, alone? Are you like a scared child lost in the woods? Fear not. Jesus is alive. He goes before you to show the way. He goes with you to help you. He comes to live in you when you receive him through faith.

Do you feel embarrassed or humiliated? Do you think your failures define you? Don't be afraid. The resurrection is God's vindication of Jesus. It looked like Jesus died a failure, even crying out, "My God, where are you?" The resurrection is God's answer to Jesus' cry. And it's God's answer to the cry of everyone who suffers, who's afraid, who feel like they don't matter.

Do you want to be free from the fears and all the junk that threatens to bury you? I came across an article that sums up what the resurrection does for us. I don't think I can improve on how it's said here:

The universe is shaken. Nothing remains the same. And yet, like the two Marys, we still run off in fear and great joy, rejoicing one moment, fainting in terror the next. Amid freshly dug graves, we mourn, we grieve, we fear.

But we live in another realm as well, wrapped in the garments of our baptism, where, as Paul reminds us, our lives are hid with Christ in God. Our tombs, and those of our loved ones, prove only as secure as Christ's.

For now, as we wander between fear and joy, things above and things below, we still gather in the graveyard. Every day we dump more sins and shameful secrets of our living and dying into that tomb the soldiers tried so hard to guard. Nothing we discard there ever comes back. But *he* does. Every day. Collecting his brothers and sisters. Including us, the frightened siblings of the two Marys.

Joy, by nature, is for sharing. It's dangerous and insane to keep fear to oneself, and totally unnecessary. Indeed, with a single hymn we may strike out joyfully for Galilee—and leave fear behind in the graveyard. "The Lord is risen! Alleluia!" He is risen indeed. (Frederick Niedner, "Reflections on the Lectionary," *Christian Century*, March 11, 2008, 21).