

The Great Easter Vigil  
March 31, 2018  
Preached by the Rev. Lisa M. Erdeljon  
St Michael's Episcopal Church, Barrington, IL  
Matthew 28:1-10

“Do not be afraid!”

Ha! “Do not be afraid!”

How many times have you heard that one before? And how many times does it actually work? How many times are you told “Don’t be afraid” and suddenly your fears are relieved?

I remember, during a youth program I was leading, many, many years ago, I looked up this phrase.

How many times do you think the Bible says, “Do not be afraid” or “Do not fear”?

Although I found all kinds of different numbers (of course... because translations...), the most common answer was: 365.

365!

That is one time for every day of the year: 365 times does Scripture say “Do not be afraid!”

...

In today’s Gospel, the women are creeping to the tomb—I imagine it something like “creeping” because I’m pretty sure that’s all anyone does in a graveyard before the sun rises...

The women are creeping to the tomb, “as the first day of the week was dawning,” so just about at dawn...

And there is this huge commotion ... an earthquake, an angel, lightning...

And the angel says, “Do not be afraid.”

As Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are coming to the tomb, to pay their respects to their lost loved one, who has died, who was laid in a tomb...

An angel appears, in a great commotion, to reveal an empty tomb, and the angel says to them: “Do not be afraid!”

...

There is some perfect symmetry here, in the Gospel narrative.

We can probably recall the scene of the Annunciation, when an angel comes to Mary to tell her the good news... one of the first things He says is, “Do not be afraid!”

And when an angel appears to Joseph, to sooth Joseph’s angst about Mary’s pregnancy, the angel says, “Do not be afraid.”

And now, as the women approach the empty tomb, an angel says, “Do not be afraid!”

I guess, maybe, angels are pretty scary creatures... or at least they have some pretty scary news.

Because how many times can an angel say, “Do not be afraid”?

...

I will admit, growing up, I was afraid of the dark. As a child, I would insist that the light in the hall be left on and my door be left open, so that even as I fell asleep, I was never in complete darkness.

Interestingly, as I grew into adolescence and young adulthood that fear shifted a little bit... no longer was it the dark (I could justify what existed in darkness)...

But instead, I was afraid of closed doors. Or more specifically, what was behind a closed door.

Faced with a closed door (especially at night, or in a new place), my mind would race to all the horrible things that could be lurking behind it...

And now, luckily, I no longer fear the dark or closed doors. Instead, I fear the unknown. That which I do not know or cannot know.

And I read this story—this part of the Gospel message—and I wonder, how scared must these women have been? How scared would I have been, if I was with them...

How terrified must it be, to come to pay respects to a loved one who has just died... how much fear might have been experienced, to see an angel, to feel the earth quake, and to see an empty tomb

You know... These women—they do not know the ending of the story yet.

We do. We certainly do.

Perhaps a little too well, even! And even before the end of tonight’s Gospel reading, we already know what has happened.

We know that there is nothing unknown now... nothing to be afraid of... nothing to fear...

But I still wonder if we can put ourselves in the place of those women—of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary—and for one brief instant, understand that pure terror they must have felt at this moment.

...

Tonight's service—the Great Vigil of Easter—moves, itself, from darkness to light  
Moves, itself, from not knowing to knowing.  
From death to resurrection.

We begin with fire, and with creation, as we journey through the Old Testament, through the Great  
Biblical History of Salvation.

We hear God creating the Heavens and the earth... humankind, in God's image, and every beast of  
the earth

And we hear Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea—the fear of the Egyptians and of the water and of  
death

And we hear that salvation is offered to all—to anyone who seeks the Lord

And we hear that God will give each of us a new heart and a new spirit—a new way of living and  
loving as God's people

We hear and experience the developing story of God's Grace until we are reminded of our own  
baptisms, the dedication of our lives to God, and finally, the empty tomb and the Resurrection of  
God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

In tonight's service, we are presented with the fear of not knowing, and simultaneously the joy of  
understanding.

We are offered the hope that even the most inconceivable is some how possible and even plausible.

Tonight, we see that death is overcome.

Fear is no longer necessary.

And nothing we encounter is stronger than God's love.

Nothing we do (or do not do) is stronger than God's grace.

Nothing will separate us from Jesus Christ.

...

In tonight's Gospel reading, these women went seeking Jesus, a man who died, who was laid in a  
tomb.

And they find Him, just as He has promised. Raised from the dead.

And He says, "Do not be afraid."

No longer is it just an angel, but it is God's Only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord who says,  
"Do not be afraid."

In tonight's worship service, we are seeking Christ, He who overcomes death, who rises and leaves that tomb empty.

And we find Him, here, among us and with us, in joy and love and light.

And for all of us—throughout history and into the great unknown of that which is yet to come...

In finding Jesus Christ, we find everything needed to banish our fears. Fears of the dark. Fears of the unknown. Fears of sin and death.

As Christ destroys death...

He also takes away the sins that troubles our conscience, and the fear of death and the grave...

And He offers us the utmost authority in saying, "there is life eternal."

God offers the ultimate authority... the ultimate comfort... the ultimate gift of grace and love.

When God says, "Do not be afraid," it is not simply a hallow plaction of empty emotion.

When God says, "Do not be afraid," God is offering God's Son—God's Word—with absolute assurance and absolute authority.

And so, as we enter into this great Paschal season—and celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior

As we begin this joyous celebration of Easter

Let God's Word speak the words of greatest authority:

Do not be afraid, for there is eternal life.

Alleluia!

Amen!