

April 12, 2020
Easter Sunday, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 31:1-6
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 28:1-10

Easter is supposed to be happy. But the story we just heard reeks of fear. To be specific ... The guards fall down comatose with fear. The angel says to the women, "Do not be afraid." The women run away with fear. *Jesus* says to them, "Do not be afraid."

The words *fear* and *afraid* are English translations of Greek words with the same root: *phobos*. Read this passage in the original Greek, and the repetition of that root is more noticeable. A correspondingly better English translation would sound more like this volley: *fear ... don't fear ... fear ... don't fear*.

The English language continues to deploy the root word *phobos*. Think acrophobia—fear of heights—and claustrophobia—fear of confined spaces. Hearing *fear* as *phobia* may help you to grasp the underlayment of sheer terror that is intended here.

Terror is *not* the first word that comes to mind when we think of Easter. But it makes sense on that first Easter, after what just happened, and during what is happening. It makes sense despite the fact that, of the four gospel accounts of the empty tomb, Matthew's is the only one that even *mentions* fear. This could be incidental, but Matthew is generally very intentional with his words. That Matthew *emphasizes* fear might lead one to conclude that fear was part of his community's *original account* of the story. Further, one might fairly suppose that fear was part of his community's *ongoing experience* of the story. If so, we might even understand that fear should be part of every Christian community's *continuing understanding* of that story.

In Matthew, *fear* is part of the story, though it's not the *whole* story. The angel's instruction to *not* fear didn't *stop* the fear, but it did *temper* it: the two Marys "left the tomb quickly with fear *and* great joy." We hear that *fear* and *great joy* aren't oppositional; in fact, *fear* and *great joy* can coexist.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." As I prepared this sermon, it occurred to me that that's ridiculous. Matthew's gospel seems to say something very different. First, it normalizes and universalizes the experience of fear. Second, it links fear and joy. Third, it puts that linked fear-joy in conversation with the resurrected Jesus.

Both the angel and Jesus say to *not* fear, but everyone knows that saying such a thing doesn't work. So maybe the immediate point is *not to not* fear. Rather, maybe the point is that faith helps us to not be *limited*, TO fear or BY fear. Faith helps us to keep walking, with one hand holding fear and the other reaching toward joy.

The resurrection doesn't do away with fear or sadness or grief or any other emotion. If it did that, it would eliminate our experience of being human. We're not zombies; we don't want to be robots. God gave us "all the feels"—even the "feels" we prefer to avoid. Instead, the resurrection re-contextualizes those emotions, moving them over, from a terrain of despair, to a terrain of redemption. In that redeemed place, death no longer has the last word, and neither does fear or sadness or grief. This is the landscape of *opposition* to death—which is to say, it's the landscape of love. The landscape of love is the landscape of peace and justice and hope and, yes, joy.

On Good Friday morning, I watched a live performance of J.S. Bach's *St. John's Passion*.¹ It was streamed from St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, the church where Bach served for nearly thirty years and where he is buried. There were so many reasons it was like nothing I'd ever seen before. The tenor was virtuosic. Participants included not only a very small group in the church, but also choirs from around the world. It was beautiful and moving and perfect for this odd time.

Near the end of that piece, when Jesus is on the cross, there is a chorale that goes like this:

O human, act justly,
love God and humankind,
then you can die without sorrow
and need not grieve!²

The star of the incarnation, the shadow of the cross, the sun of the resurrection: each part of the story of Jesus only makes sense in light of the rest of the story. Good Friday reveals the worst of human existence; Easter Sunday attests that there is much more to come. On Good Friday, love seems dead on the cross; on Easter Sunday, we see that love *is* victorious.

Last week I read an article in Religion News Service entitled "Fearing Courageously in the Face of COVID-19." What caught my attention was the phrase "fearing courageously." The article turned out to be about healthcare professionals who are continuing to show up for work despite the risk. Some of you are among the healthcare professionals who are "fearing courageously." Looking at this from a Cristian perspective, the article draws lines to the theology of Thomas Aquinas. It says this:

The medieval Christian philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas helpfully distinguished between fear as an *emotion* and fear as a *way of living*.

The emotion of fear, Aquinas argued, is a good part of being human. We humans are natural and inescapable lovers: when we perceive something threatening those whom we love—including ourselves—we naturally are afraid. If our love is healthy, then our fear is also healthy. That sort of healthy fear is not a sin. Rather, it's a sign of love.

...

To love well in the face of fear, Aquinas says, is to be courageous. To be courageous is not to run headlong into the face of danger with no regard for the consequences, nor to deny or dismiss fear. Courage is not the opposite of fear. Rather, to be courageous is to rightly appraise danger and feel the weight of fear, and yet, even so, to stand firm and do what love requires.

...

[Among healthcare professionals facing COVID-19] Many are afraid, but they press on because they have committed themselves to care for the sick and the vulnerable. This commitment to care, this love, does not remove their fear. But it fuels and sustains their courage.³

It might be helpful to think of emotions more generally not just as *feelings* but also as *ways of living*. This time is a weird period of forced reduction, an almost monastic sort of paring back. In that paring back reassessment is happening, and at the heart of that reassessment is love. *What* do we love? *Who* do we love? *How* do we love? Unpacking all this requires vulnerability and honesty. Fear and joy are both really about love. Maybe a life of Christian Easter faith is about courage in our fear, and also courage in our joy.

Today we will wish one another a happy Easter. We will probably be at least a little sad that we're not doing so in person. At the center of that sadness is the kernel of love that binds us together. Despite that sadness, or maybe because of it, I expect that we will mean our "Happy Easters" like never before.

Those words—"Happy Easter"—are actually a simple blessing. Therefore offering them is an act of love. Therein lies the joy, for giver and for the receiver.

Christ is risen. Happy Easter!

Notes

¹ This production of St. John's Passion was by Bachfest Leipzig, featured tenor Benedikt Kristjansson and livestreamed on Facebook on April 10, 2020. As of this writing, the archived video was available at <https://www.facebook.com/bacharchiv/videos/224088308838132/> (accessed April 12, 2020).

² This translation is from the Bach Cantatas website, available at <https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Texts/BWV245-Eng3.htm> (accessed April 12, 2020).

³ Warren Kinghorn, "Fearing Courageously in the Face of COVID-19," Religion News Service, April 7, 2020, available at <https://religionnews.com/2020/04/07/fearing-courageously-in-the-face-of-covid-19/> (accessed April 12, 2020).