

DO NOT BE AFRAID

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

April 12, 2009

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8,

I Corinthians 15:1-11

Robert Frost has written, “A poem begins as a lump in the throat... a homesickness, a lovesickness.”¹

If a poem begins that way, maybe Easter does too, begins as a lump in the throat, a homesickness, a lovesickness... an expression of something that we long for so deeply that we cannot even find words for it. There is about Easter a lump in the throat, a hope that its message of life over death, of love over hate, of God’s power over our inimitable power to mess things up is better and stronger than we are.

Easter has little of the same feel as Christmas with its decorated trees and presents and frenzied shopping season. There is not the same cultural insanity about Easter as there is for Christmas. Fewer adherents, less wrapping paper. And while we know the Christmas story in the Bible in great detail with its wondering shepherds abiding in the fields, it’s wise ones from the East, its hidden manger and holy family; there is not the same familiarity with the details in April as there was in December.

We know there is an empty tomb, women who go in the early morning with spices ready to grieve, and an alarming but hopeful announcement that they hear from an angel or was it angels whose basic message is first and foremost, “Do not be afraid,” based upon the surprising new reality that “The Lord is risen.” Beyond that, it’s anybody’s guess where the bonnets, the colored eggs, and the chocolate bunnies come from!

Mark, whose version of the Easter story we read this morning doesn’t present us with a visual sighting of the risen Lord, as if somehow that might be too much, like looking directly into the sun. Better to look at the things on the horizon that it illuminates instead.

We have only the word of the young man in a white robe casually sitting on the slab where Jesus’ body had been laid. He tells Mary Magdalene of *DaVinci Code* fame, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome that they should not be afraid, but that they should take a look at the place where Jesus’ body had been laid because Jesus is no longer there, he has been raised from the dead.

This would be where Mark and I part company as storytellers as far as Easter is concerned. Had I been the evangelist (not that I should tell Mark what to say or how to write, but let me try) I would have put some enthusiasm into the story at this point. It needs a little punch. I would have described the women as overjoyed and exuberant, doing cartwheels and clog dancing with excitement. From the garden, they would have run out to tell everyone what they had seen and heard, grabbing people along the way, sharing the good news, giddy with glee, rejoicing at God’s faithfulness in raising Jesus

from the dead. After all, this is really breaking news for once, breaking open a sealed tomb, and breaking out of the bonds of death. Breaking news like this is the kind of thing in which CNN specializes. Anderson Cooper, eat your heart out.

In contrast, Mark is reticent in his description, sparing of adjectives and adverbs, suddenly speechless. He simply says that the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for.... And that's really where the gospel ends, with the conjunction "for," although the editors of the NRSV translation of the Bible complete the sentence by noting "they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid." Which makes sense, because that's what they were.

They were afraid. And why were they afraid? Well they might have been afraid for several reasons. Perhaps they were afraid that his body had been stolen, that the nightmare of Friday was not over and their grief was now complicated by the crime of body snatching.

They might have been afraid that this was some religious or political trick that would backfire on them and the disciples, a plot hatched by Herod or Pilate.

Maybe they were afraid of the implications of a risen Lord. Now there's something to think about... the work that lay ahead, the message that would have to be taken to a skeptical world, the divisions in families and the breaking with tradition that a resurrection would represent in their closed and highly structured world.

Or maybe they were just afraid of the whole thing about death! Death is creepy and death is emotional.

Which is why Easter, begins as a lump in the throat, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It's that lump in the throat that we all get sometimes when we think about our own death or the death of someone we love. Death, that old shadow that keeps showing up at twilight when the day is ended; or at the ninth hour as Mark puts it so strangely, when the clouds have rolled in and the darkness reaches out to take the failing hand of the day; that time when the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done.

Death is no respecter of persons you know. It comes to the young, to the preemie in the NICU, the seven year old with blastoma, the mother who is in her early forties and whose only hope is that her daughter will remember her when she is gone, and maybe with hair on her head. Death steals grandma from her nursing home bed and snatches the young man at the party after the Crystal Meth overdose. Death can even come on a cross where an innocent man suffers for what he did not do, and so experiences the death he should not have known, were it not for a greater good we barely understand.

The world is like that you know, unjust, a place where innocents suffer, and earthquakes wipe out villages, and terrorists appear, and bombs explode on foreign roads and in market places tearing everybody and everything apart in its wake. Which is also what Easter addresses, in case you didn't realize it; not just our personal concern about

the soul or about eternal longevity, or what happens to the atoms and cells of our bodies when we die; our self awareness.

Easter is, after all, not simply one man's triumph over the grave, awesome and inexplicable as that may be. It is more. So much more. It is the triumph of God over all that is evil, all that would deny what is good, all that would negate the love and healing and peace that is God's intention for the Creation. Easter is God's persistent, "Yes," in the face of our persistent "No." God's "Do not be afraid," in the times when God knows we are afraid.

And there is plenty of that going around these days, isn't there. ...fear. It's not just the porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, not just the ginning up of Iran's nuclear capacity, nor North Korea's testing that has us anxious. Not the fact that Osama bin Laden can still run audio tapes on Al Jazeera's news service whenever he wants.

It's closer to home than that, at least for the time being. It's the fear that we don't have enough, that we're running out, that maybe tomorrow it'll be us on the unemployment line, that the decline of our savings and our 401K has closed off our future, and we may never be able to stop working. Our fear is that the Bernie Madoffs of the world are really in charge, and they've stolen everything we have.

So now we are left to wonder if everything is an illusion, if life is futile after all. You know... that story of Sisyphus rolling that enormous stone up the hill only to have it roll down again. That's what we're afraid is the real truth behind the truth of life.

The hottest books in the religion section at Barnes and Noble these days are the books that are anti-religion, the ones that supposedly pull the curtain back on the Wizard of Oz and show him for what he is, an old fool who doesn't have any power, only pyrotechnics and a lot of dials and switches connected to nothing. It is the worst of all our fears; that God is like that. That no one's really in charge, or worse yet, the One who is in charge means us ill.

But thank goodness, no thank God, that is not the case. There is a God and that God means for us better than we have ever imagined for ourselves; and the proof is in the affirmation we celebrate today. "Do not be afraid," the angel said, "he is risen and is going before you into Galilee, there you will see him."

Which brings the whole thing home, doesn't it? Because the basic question of Easter when you finally boil it down to its purest essence is, "How good and powerful is God?" The rest is really icing on the cake if you think about it. The resurrection is not so difficult for a God who can do all things.

If God is powerless or not for us, then we're stuck. Life is meaningless and death is the final punctuation mark on the absurdness of living.

But if God is both powerful and good, then there is really nothing that God cannot do, whether it be creating the stars and hurling them into space, or forming the first centipede or pollywog or platypus however long it took, or leaning down and breathing

into the first man and woman the breath of life. Maybe even breathing into God's own son the breath of resurrection life, putting the final and ultimate punctuation mark on life itself.

That's why Easter begins with a lump in the throat, because so much is at stake in what is affirmed in Jesus' resurrection. It is something that we long for so deeply that we cannot even find words for it; a homesickness, to be home with God; a lovesickness, to understand that we are the object of God's longing and God's loving.

Isn't that, after all, what we really need to know, that the lump in the throat is not just our longing for God, but God's longing for us as well?

Which is why on Easter morning, maybe for reasons we don't even fully understand we get dressed up and wake up the kids and bring them too, hoping against hope that there is something that we may hear, a word that may strike home, a story that may just be the story we have longed to hear, the truth of which we will know when we hear it even though we do not fully understand it.

Most of you know that eight weeks ago I had open heart surgery to replace a defective aortic valve for the third time and to repair an aneurysm in my aorta.

It's been a journey these past eight weeks, and I just don't have words yet for much of what I feel about this third chance at life that I've been given. Not yet.

I can tell you, however, that on the day of the surgery, early in the morning as the night gave way to the dawn, KC Ptomey, Christian, Judy and Andy who are my family, my friend Greg Jones and his wife Camilla, and I held hands and prayed in a small room when the nurse came to get me and walk me to the operating suite. No gurney, no wheelchair. No nice drugs to dull any desire on my part to look for the closest exit door and find a way out. A thought that I admit crossed my mind if only for the drama of it.

I just know I hugged everyone at the end of the prayer, and I turned my back to all of them, and I walked down the hallway through some doors that led to the operating suites, and the particular suite that was waiting for me, with about ten people already there, all masked and gowned and sterile scrubbed and looking eager to get started. More eager than I was.

It felt a little like I was walking the Green Mile, going down that hallway. You know how your imagination can get the best of you.

But on the other hand I felt okay, I felt safe, because regardless of what happened from that point on, saying goodbye to the dearest in my heart and opening the doors to the room where my future lay, I knew I would be all right. Live or die, I would be all right, because of the message that the women heard at the empty tomb on this morning. "Do not be afraid," the angel said. "He is risen." All the way down the hallway to the operating room I kept thinking, "Live or die, do not be afraid. He is risen."

A few days ago Joanna Adams, a dear friend and Presbyterian minister in Atlanta, wrote me a little get well card, one of the many, many cards that I have received in recent

weeks from so many of you. In Joanna's scrawl she offered a brief sentence, "With all the troubles loose in the world these days," she wrote, "I can't wait for Easter morning!"

Now, she didn't say I can't wait for the *reassurance* of Easter, or the *celebration of our faith* at Easter. She said, instead, "I can't wait for Easter morning." As if she believed that all the troubles loose in the world somehow would change on Easter morning.

Which of course they have. They have if you understand the message the women heard at the tomb, "Do not be afraid. He is risen."

Because of that amazing proclamation we can live now, not doubtful but confident, not fearful but hopeful, sent into the world to live out a changed reality, the truth that God is love, God is great, God means us well, and nothing in life or in death can separate us from God's love.

So, to you young couples starting out your life together, stars in your eyes, believing in yourselves and trusting in the promises you have made to each other, do not be afraid.

You who are living on a fixed income, and who are living on much less these days, do not be afraid.

You who are worried about your job, or are out of work and are struggling to get back on your feet. Do not be afraid.

You teenagers, who are living with so much stress, so many pressures, so many expectations to look just so, and be just so, and conform just so, do not be afraid.

Those of you who are worn out by what life does to all of us, wears us out, especially in this big, grinding, exhausting, noisy, wonderful city; take heart, rest easy, do not be afraid.

And you who have waited in the doctor's office and hoped for better news than you received, who now must undergo chemo or radiation or frightening surgery do not be afraid.

There is good news today. The world has changed, and for those who have the wit to pay attention, things will never be the same. For God's love is set loose on earth and death itself cannot overcome it.

He is going before us into the Galilee of our life, there we will see him, until at last we see him once again, face to face.

Don't be afraid. The Lord is risen. He is risen, indeed. Hallelujah.

¹ As quoted by John Lithgow, **Poet's Corner**. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007, 91.