**APRIL 9, 2023 Matthew 28:1-10 “Leaving the Tomb of Fear”**

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

It was our rascally American writer [Mark Twain](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/mark_twain.html) who gave us this quote: *“If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first.”* Now, this may seem like a very odd way to begin an Easter sermon; you are probably thinking, “I didn’t hear anything about frogs in that passage, did you, Marge?” This kind of opening is certainly not an elegant, uplifted panoply of verbal magnificence. But it is very real, and very much to the point, if the point is understanding how this pivotal story of Jesus relates to the real lives of real people like you and me. ‘Cause sometimes in life, you need to eat a frog or two, and knowing how that works out makes the rest of life so much easier.

 Our Easter story, as told this year by St. Matthew, begins before dawn on Sunday, with Mary Magdalene, that most devoted of disciples, and another Mary, possibly the mother of Jesus, going out to the tomb. They probably haven’t had much sleep, what with the horrors of the last day or so, and the Jewish authorities trying to round up all the Jesus sympathizers, but traveling together at four in the morning is certainly safer than going in broad daylight. It is an historical surety that these two women have never met Mark Twain, but they understand very well the principle that he gave us, the one about the frogs. Going to see the tomb of their beloved Jesus, like eating a frog, is best done first thing in the morning, so as to get the hard stuff out of the way, right? They know it’s gonna be painful, and gross, and gut-wrenchingly sad, all of that, but despite all of that, these strong women have some hopes. Hopefully, the stone will be undisturbed; hopefully, the grave will not have been looted or violated by the Romans. There may be an odor, but they will push through and prepare the body with sweet aloes and other spices. So, they expect to eat a frog, as it were; they anticipate the unpleasantness and a tough road ahead, but what they sure *weren’t* expecting was an earthquake followed by, or possibly caused by, an angel.

The tomb is, of course, still being guarded by the Romans; there have been rumors of attempted theft of this particular body, and they don’t want any more trouble from this Jesus character or his shifty followers. But even the mighty Roman eagle and its minions are no match for an angel of the Lord, and they are just terrified, paralyzed with fear. Interestingly, the women seem to be rather unfazed by this, like they see angels all the time or something. But the angel knows his humans, doesn’t he? The first thing out of his mouth is the most central theme, cover-to-cover, in all of scripture. What does he say? The same thing he said thirty-odd years ago, when Jesus was born that cold night out in the rural acres south of there. Do not be afraid, he says, **do not be afraid.** He then continues…I know, you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified, but he is not here, he has risen, like he told you he would. Do not be afraid.

 The brilliant contrast between the studly Roman soldiers quaking in their sandals before being entirely paralyzed by fear and these gentle women is deliberate and important to notice, because it underscores a critical distinction that we need to make, and keep on making till we know it by heart. There is a difference here, between fear of something *actual*, and fear of something *possible.* The Roman soldiers are experiencing real, genuine fear, because they were not trained for earthquakes and angels showing up where they are trying to guard stuff. They are experiencing the biological response – shock, right? - to an actual threat, but they are so beyond both fight or flight, they are just stuck, rigid with fear. This will *not* look good on the company report! The women are not so disposed, however, but are at risk instead of falling prey to being afraid, not of an *actual* threat, but of *perceived* threats or problems. Afraid of what might or might not have happened to Jesus’ body, afraid of what might or might not happen to them if they report that his body has gone missing, *afraid* can take so many twists and turns, but the angel tries to ground them in what is, not what might be. Do not be afraid, he says…choose the real over the imagined, the actual over the possible. Having fear and being afraid are not quite the same thing, are they?

 We need to push this distinction a bit farther, because it is the very keystone of our faith together. The angel does not say not to fear; there are many things, legitimate things, frightful and dangerous things, that one should fear. This is no pie-in-the-sky angel; the world is full of scary stuff. But what we need to learn, as these first two witnesses of the resurrection were learning, is to limit our fears to the actual, the factual, not to let fear devolve into afraidness and run roughshod over all the potentially wonderful parts of life, which we can easily miss because of pointless worry and overly active imaginations. This is why he says, do not *be* afraid…engage your will here, and limit your fear response to things that actually warrant it. Do not *be* afraid, even in the face of death, because, as you are learning now, death is not the final word. The one you love lives again, and will see you soon. Therefore, make a choice…do not be afraid.

 These two strong women have been through a lot, they are bone-weary, but the possibility that Jesus somehow survived all of this horror just energizes them to their very core. They set out running to tell the other disciples, but they don’t get very far…Jesus himself meets them, greets them, they fall all over themselves and him in joy and reunion, and what is the first thing he says? I missed you so much, or, that was really an amazing experience? No, none of that. He says what they and what we most need to hear…do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.

 Go back with me to Mr. Twain, if you would, because that second frog, the big one has arrived in our story. Remember what he said? “If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first.” Jesus is back, alive, well, whole, radiant, and here to tell us that the big frog, the one we all strain to swallow, isn’t so big after all. It is easy for him to tell the women, and tell us, not to be afraid, ‘cause he has been there, ate the big scary frog, Death, and now knows that it isn’t nearly so big as he feared. If you get the big frog out of the way, everything else is easier. So if we, through faith and will, can manage and conquer our fear of Death, everything else is just little frogs. Everything else becomes easy, once Death is off the fear table.

It has always, always struck me that we, Christian folk, are uniquely positioned in the world to live lives free of undue fear and worry. Our Lord, our Savior, our friend and teacher, our leader and coach, our Jesus, made it back alive, with encouragement and instruction to us all. But none of that wisdom and power will make the difference it could if we do not engage both *faith* and *will i*n managing fear in this life, and learning to distinguish between actual stuff to be feared and pointless stuff that we just waste our lives worrying about. If it weren’t important, angels would not have said it. Jesus would not have said it on both sides of the grave, do not be afraid. Don’t waste your precious life worrying, especially since the biggest fear of all has already been dealt with. Do not fear Death, he says, and backs it up with his actions.

 Part of me wants to be all properly High-Church for this holiest of holy days, and wax eloquent with stained-glass prose. But the bigger part of me just wants to pound this one nail, polish this one rock, sing this one song, do not be afraid. We mentioned the upcoming Bible study earlier; it begins tomorrow evening, and the title of this resurrection-themed six weeks together? *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times.* I am compelled to urge us to choose, *choose*, to limit our fear response to stuff that is actually, not just fictionally, scary. And let the rest go nowhere, where it almost always goes. What do the ancient Chinese say? Most of us spend our lives gathering bundles of sticks to build bridges we will never cross.

Thank you, this morning, for being here, and absorbing again the absolutely critical centerpiece of authentic Christian practice. You have been good sports, what with frogs and bundles of sticks and whatnot. I am glad that we were here today to shore up the foundation on which we all depend. Death is horrible, but it is not the last word. Let’s live *that* truth, o beloved children of God. Amen.