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“Love Wins”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Resurrection of the Lord / Easter (Year A)

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Matthew 28:1-10

Now, if that doesn't make your hair stand on end, as preacher Fleming Rutledge says, I haven't read it right!¹

Right here in the gospel of Matthew, we find a made-for-Hollywood, “lights, camera, action!” scripture reading! Any way we read this passage or celebrate this day that is less than breathtaking does this story a disservice. We try to bring our best to this day, to be sure, with our high liturgy, trumpeter, choral anthems, and triumphant hymns. We try to capture the power of this story, and yet we also must understand that what we seek to convey here—the power of God is far beyond our abilities and, perhaps, writes Annie Dillard, even made worse by our attempts:

The higher Christian churches—where, if anywhere, I belong—come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God. I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. In the high churches they saunter though the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked.²

¹ *The Undoing of Death*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), p 257.

² *Holy the Firm*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), p 59.

And wouldn't we be, though? If the ground started shaking beneath us this Easter morning? If our beautifully arranged Easter lilies toppled, the grape juice spilled, and the candles tipped over? Wouldn't we be shocked if screaming broke out and people started hiding under their chairs or running around in fear or staring straight ahead in shock because of the chaos, because of the turn of events, because of the angel that looked like lightning, because of the boulder that had been rolled away as if it were no heavier than a giant marshmallow? Wouldn't we, like the guards at the tomb, shake with fear all over until we became "like dead people?" Wouldn't we be changed in that moment? Changed in that instant? Changed forever?

Tom Long writes:

The call to worship on that first Easter was not a cheery "Good Morning!" but a shattering earthquake that rippled a seismic shock through history and signaled that the fault lines of human history had shifted dramatically toward grace and hope. A blazingly brilliant angel descends from heaven to appear at the tomb, effortlessly rolling back the heavy stone and sitting on it . . . as if to say, "Well, so much for that!"³

God sure knows how to get our attention.

Friends, we are witnesses 2000 years after the fact to an event that changed the course of history. And though we don't know exactly what those women must have felt as the earth shook beneath their feet, on this day we imagine their shock and awe and hope to grasp in some small way the cosmic power of the events of that day and the meaning of that pivotal moment when the blindingly bright angel pointed to the empty tomb. On this day, we relive that moment and rejoice together because from that moment on, the world has never been the same, ever again.

The women who were there that day, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, must have been standing or sitting or crouching with their faces buried in each other's shoulders (they can't even look at this angel who is like lightning and is so dazzlingly bright) when they hear his words, "Do not be afraid." And why, they

³ *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Commentary, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 322.

wonder, still trembling, should they *not* be afraid? The earth is shaking, their Lord is dead, their lives are over, and hope is gone. All is lost. Why in the world should they *not* be afraid?

Because, says the angel, “He is not here, for he has been raised, just like he said. Come and see.”

And so they go to see the empty tomb and then they run, “with fear and great joy” to tell the disciples. As they run along, “suddenly” Jesus appears before them. And Jesus repeats what the angel said, “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell the others to come to Galilee. They will see me there.”

“Don’t be afraid,” he says. As if it is that easy to look at a dead man who is living again. As if it is that easy to grasp that their God really is this cosmically powerful. As if it is that easy to realize that this really is Jesus, their living Lord, standing before them, having defeated death, saying, “Don’t be afraid. We’ll catch up in Galilee.” It’s okay now. Love wins. Death doesn’t. Sin doesn’t. Hatred doesn’t. Fear doesn’t. Love wins. And nothing is ever the same again.

Long writes:

Somewhere along the path to the cemetery [the two women] left one world and entered another. Without even knowing that they had crossed the border, they left the old world, where hope is in constant danger, and might makes right, and peace has little chance, and the rich get richer, and the weak all eventually suffer under some Pontius Pilate or another, and people hatch murderous plots, and dead people stay dead, and [these women] entered the startling and breathtaking world of resurrection and life. Jesus of Nazareth, who had been dead as a doornail on Friday afternoon, was not in his tomb that morning, and the world—theirs and ours—has been turned upside down ever since. . . .

The wonderful news of Easter is that Jesus is alive, and the terrible news of Easter is also that Jesus is alive, because nothing is nailed down anymore . . . The way the world used to be, if something troubling got in the way, like a

call for racial justice or a worker for peace or an advocate for mercy, the world could just kill it and it would be done with. But Jesus is alive, and righteousness, mercy and peace cannot be dismissed with a cross or a sword. We have to decide where we stand and what we will do in this new and frightening resurrection world.⁴

If we stand in the old world, as if Easter hasn't happened and the tomb is still dark and full of death, we will inevitably find ourselves consumed with fear and despair. The old world, that pre-resurrection world, wants us to be afraid that hate will win, that war will consume the world, that violence will have the final say. The old world wants us to depend on ourselves, to forget the needs of others because we have ourselves to look after. The old world wants us to put our trust in money, power, and position—and wants us to fear death—always death, the enemy which will get us one day, if we aren't careful.

Too many of us stay in this old world, the pre-resurrection world, where Jesus is still dead and locked tight in the tomb. In this world, writes Peter Gomes:

Everybody is fearful, terrified of some public or private demon, some terrible unnamed fear that gnaws away even in the midst of our joy, some cloud that hangs over our head or in the recesses of our spirit. It is fear that not only holds us together but keeps us from being whole. Fear, not sin, is the great curse. Fear that I'll be recognized for the fraud that I am—the great imposter complex. Fear that I will fail in some worthy endeavor or fear that I will succeed in some unworthy enterprise. Fear that I will not have enough time to do what I must. Fear that I will hurt or be hurt. Fear that I will not know love. Fear that my love will be painful and hurtful. Fear that the things I most believe and trust are not so. . . Every one of us is a hostage to fear.⁵

The angel sits up on the stone by the empty tomb like a light so bright it burns our eyes and says to us, “Do not be afraid.” Jesus walks in front of us after being

⁴ Long, p 322-23.

⁵ Peter J Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, “Easter: When Life Begins,” (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1998), 77.

tortured and killed on a cross like a criminal. He is alive and he says, “Don’t be afraid.”

“These are the empowering words of Easter.” Do not fear. Do not be afraid. Of anything! Least of all of death. Comes again:

Freedom from fear is the achievement of the resurrection – not freedom from death but freedom from fear. We do not fear death; death is the incarnation of our fears. Thus to defeat fear is to defeat death and to defeat death is to defeat fear. It is not death that lurks in the background, it is the fear of death, and to diminish those fears is to gain life everlasting.⁶

To live without fear is to live in the new resurrection world of life.

Easter, thanks be to God, is our reminder of this new world and our invitation to leave the old world behind so that we might live in this new world—fearless and full of hope. At the Easter moment, when the empty tomb stared back at the fearful women, suddenly they were invited to leave their old life behind and embrace a new life. Nothing can ever be the same again, my friends. The Lord is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Death has been defeated and life, hope, and joy now reign supreme in this new world. We don’t have to live in fear. We get to live in love. Love wins. Love wins.

I know how easy it is to wonder if this can be true. Can we believe that love has won when suicide bombers go into churches on Palm Sunday in Egypt? Can we believe that love has won when children die from poisonous gases intended to kill innocents? Can we believe that love has won when discrimination is legal? When immigrants live in fear? When refugees are denied asylum? With so many examples of the power and prevalence of hate around us, how can we believe that love has won?

Because it has. And after the empty tomb of Easter, it *always* will.

⁶ Ibid.

Do you know who you are going to be in this new and frightening, earth-shaking resurrection world? Do I?

Not really, but I do know this: God is love. And Jesus is alive. And we have a choice about which world we will live in: The old world of suffocating fear and death or the new world of abundant life and love. I know where Jesus is. And I know that's where I want to be. Let's meet him together and let's live out his love—in Galilee, in Durham, at this table of grace and mercy, and in our world.

The Lord is risen!

He is risen indeed.

Alleluia! Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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