

## Easter A 2023 Matthew 28:1-10

If we've read it once in scripture, we've read it dozens of times: *Do not be afraid*. Angels almost always greet humans with those words, because the angel's own appearance is terrifying, or the circumstances are frightening, or the message they are delivering requires courage. On the first Easter morning, the Marys have all three reasons to be afraid: they meet an angel whose appearance is like lightning, they witness an earthquake and the opening of the tomb, and they're told that Jesus isn't there because he has been raised. It's scary enough to make the military men faint, but the women, who are evidently made of stronger stuff, are commissioned as the first evangelists with the daunting task of reporting the resurrection to the rest of Jesus' disciples—an assignment that will certainly require courage and fortitude. Matthew tells us that they begin their mission with joy, but also still fear, so when they run into Jesus on the way, he tells them, again, *Do not be afraid*.

So many centuries later, we celebrate Easter by sharing in the Marys' joy, but we gloss over the fear that led both the angel and Jesus himself to reassure them, *Do not be afraid*. For one thing, we don't have the firsthand frightening experiences of the women: we don't come face to face with a bright, shiny angel; we don't see the tomb open in the midst of an earthquake; we don't encounter the risen Jesus, who might have at first been mistaken for a ghost, but who proves to have a resurrected body, with feet that can be held. But we also miss hearing the message the way the women would have—a message that was awe-inspiring but also frightening for them to convey: Who would believe them? How would the disciples respond to what would have seemed like an incredible lie? We are no longer surprised by the empty tomb. Even if we weren't gathered in church, we live in a predominantly Christian culture, so the good news of the resurrection isn't really news for us at all—we've had 2000 years to get used to it, so it doesn't shock or inspire fear the way it would have for the Marys and Jesus' other disciples.

Still, that instruction *Do not be afraid* is just as much for us as it was for the first witnesses to the resurrection. Because Jesus being raised from the dead was not just about his own life, an isolated event, two millennia ago. Jesus' resurrection changed the world and our place in it, making evil, injustice, destruction, even death itself temporary instead of the end of the story, redeemable instead of inevitable. The other day we were talking about how Easter always just about coincides with tax day, give or take a week or two. Just when we thought we could rely on death and taxes being the only two certainties in this world, the risen Jesus comes along and says, *Nope, only taxes*. So those heartbreaking experiences of the human condition that we are so often told we just have to learn to live with, because they're an inescapable part of life? The risen Jesus says, *no*. The resurrection shows us a world that is no longer subject to those powers that defy God's good intentions for our good and abundant life in this good and abundant creation.

The Marys left the tomb with great joy, but also still with fear. Likewise, the hope and promise of new life which *we* find in the resurrection is cause for both joy and fear: If even death is no longer what it seems, how can we be certain of anything? What will our lives look like if we're no longer bound by old constraints? If we are freed from the grave itself, from what else are we freed—and what are we called to change or let go in order to experience that freedom fully? Living a new life, with new hope, even with new joy, is not for the faint of heart; trusting the unknown requires courage. Yet it is God who went to hell and back who meets us on the way and says to us, *Do not be afraid*. If we no longer have reason to fear even death, what is left for us to fear in life? So let us go boldly, not just to share the good news, but to live new lives in the way of Christ, making the hope of redemption a reality, so that fear forever gives way to joy.