

THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD, A
Acts 10:34-43
Colossians 3:1-4
Matthew 28:1-10

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“With Fear and Great Joy”

Twenty years ago an earthquake hit the Nisqually delta in Washington, near where my brother and his wife Carolyn live. When the earth began to shake that day, Carolyn ran out of the house for safety – but the ground was quaking so hard she couldn’t keep her balance or even stand upright. She stumbled and fell to her hands and knees on the grass, and that’s how she rode out the earthquake. It was terrifying.

According to scripture, Easter is like an earthquake – it shakes up our world in a way that brings both fear and great joy. The Easter story in Matthew is dramatic: an earthquake rolls away the stone, guards faint from fear, two women meet an angel, then they meet Jesus himself, risen! Scripture says the women ran from the empty tomb “with fear and great joy.”

That’s a beautiful way to describe how we greet life, as people who celebrate Easter. We experience fear, but we also live with great joy because Christ is risen.

Sometimes fear is so powerful, it seems like there’s no solid ground to stand on. We might be afraid for our physical wellbeing, when illness comes or health declines or our safety is threatened. Many people are fearful about money, living so close to the margin they don’t have enough for rent or food or medicine. I can’t tell you how many church people, friends and acquaintances are paralyzed with fear for loved ones who are in trouble, making dangerous choices or acting in self-destructive ways. All of us have become a lot better acquainted with fear these last three years, when we had to shut ourselves away from Covid’s invisible threat. Our society is still working through the effects of this communal fear, in ways we can’t fully perceive but must not ignore.

These days, courage has become more important for our faith journey. Courage doesn’t mean we have no fear. Courage means we are able to act in spite of fear. We don’t let fear paralyze us. Instead, we let faith carry us – Easter faith.

When I was a little kid I was terrified of thunderstorms, just completely panicked. We lived in the Midwest, and every summer there came those booming, crashing thunderstorms that rattled all the windows. I became convinced that lightning would strike our house, and there was nobody who could comfort my fears, because nobody could guarantee it *wouldn’t* happen. There was always that chance, and that tiny chance paralyzed me.

This is how fear operates. Anxiety keeps us focused on a fearful future, focused on what *could* happen, what *might* happen, convincing us the ground is not solid beneath us. But faith assures us that right now, in this present moment, we are held in the hands of a loving God – and God’s love is stronger than anything. We do not belong to fear. We belong to God’s resilient, courageous love, no matter what does happen. That’s the message of Easter.

The women who went to the tomb that Easter morning knew all about fear in the sense of worry and terror. But God showed them fear in the sense of awe at God’s power and goodness. And how fear and great joy can live together in people who follow Christ.

These women had waited by the cross for long, sad hours while Jesus died. Then they went to the tomb to see his body safely laid to rest. And thanks be to God, they were also there on Easter morning to meet Jesus raised from the dead -- a miracle the rest of us have been unpacking for over two thousand years! On that amazing morning, what guidance did they hear? From an angel: “Don’t be afraid.” From Jesus himself, “Do not be afraid.”

No human being can convince us not to be afraid. Doctors can’t guarantee a good outcome. Loved ones can’t protect us from all the hard things that *could* happen. Only God can say “Do not fear” and promise that no matter what *does* happen, no matter what a day or a life may hold, God is able to strengthen and lift us up. Whatever we may have to face, we will never face it alone. That’s Easter’s promise.

In this world there is so much love, and also so much pain. But this is the joyful gift of Easter: through Christ’s resurrection, God brings undying love to where the deepest pain is. Love that lasts forever. Even in the face of the greatest cruelty – human beings killing God’s Son – God says: No, that kind of hatred and injustice does not win. God defies hate and cruelty, not by fighting back, not through violence, but through love. God loves humanity by forgiving us and bringing back the life the Savior we killed. Easter is God’s life force enduring, proving its resilience, overcoming sin’s damage. Overturning fear’s intimidation.

Easter tells the world: Love is stronger than hate. Life is stronger than death. Joy is stronger than despair. Hope is stronger than fear.

The women went out from the empty tomb “with fear and great joy.” And so do we.

Easter gives us power to keep faith in God’s goodness amid our human fears. Fear doesn’t leave us, but fear can never own us. Easter invites us to a life of joy and confidence and courage. A life where we share our life energy in compassionate and generous ways. This is the essence of freedom and joy.

I see Easter confidence and Easter courage being lived out every single day. We might not feel earthquakes or see angels, but sure enough, Easter lives among us.

A woman has been through all kinds of mistreatment and betrayal, but she maintains a sense of joy. She knows she is loved by God. And you know, somehow that's enough. She is far from paralyzed, she is set free by Easter love. And she is passionate about sharing love with the homeless clients she serves, and pursuing justice and advocacy any way she can.

An certain man operates out of deep trust and confidence in God. His faith allows him to face the challenges of aging and ill health with a deep sense of being loved and claimed by God. He takes care of a relative who is sick. He lives with a gentle, quiet commitment that speaks of love and truth. People want to be around this man, because Easter is alive in him.

There is a person who experienced abuse as a child. They find in their Christian faith a source of healing for old wounds. Resurrection healing, little by little, is allowing the joy in them to come forward.

A grandmother prays her family through poverty. She helps with the grandkids. Shares groceries. Encourages job applications. Believes in her family and leans on God's providing. She draws courage from God and shares strength and courage with those around her. That's Easter confidence.

A father wakes up worried at night over his adult daughter, whose life is endangered by addiction. The fear and anxiety can be paralyzing. When he can't sleep he gets out of bed and gets down on his knees, and he turns his fears over to God. He says, *God, I know you love my daughter just as much as I do. Tonight I give her over to your care. Please watch over her, and show me the best way to help.* I call that Easter courage. There are no guarantees to calm his fears, but he calls on confidence that comes from Easter faith. Confidence that God is good, God holds this world in love, and healing can happen through God's resurrection power.

None of the terrible things people go through can have the last word – because Easter tells us God has the last word. Easter brings hope beyond hope, hope that is really beyond our comprehension.

Easter is love that cannot be undone. Love that is willing to endure death but can never be killed. Easter leads all of us to a deeper way of love – and love is the only way forward for our human family.

It is with both fear and great joy that we proclaim: *Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen indeed. Alleluia!*