

Do not be Afraid! Once more the first thing that an angel says to someone is, do not be afraid. As the women sit at the tomb on the day of Jesus' resurrection the angel says to them, do not be afraid. Mary heard it from Gabriel nine months before Jesus was born; now she hears it again from another angel. Do not be afraid! The women run to tell the other disciples that Jesus has risen from death and suddenly Jesus himself is standing in front of them saying, "Greetings! Do not be afraid!" Jesus is assuring them that no matter what happens he will be with them. They don't have to be afraid.

At Jesus arrest all the disciples had fled in fear. Peter in his fear had denied Jesus three times at the high priest's house. The disciples hid in fear behind locked doors after Jesus death. Now the women are told, do not be afraid! God has overcome the worst that humanity could do. And now Jesus, the crucified one, stands before them as the two women fall to their knees and hold his feet. And the first thing he says is to not be afraid. He has overcome torture and death, and now stands before them.

Jesus lived and died in a time when the Jews were conquered by the power of Rome. Death from disease, food born illnesses, childbirth death and death as a punishment from the government was a very real possibility. During Passover the Romans sent extra soldiers to Jerusalem to help control the pilgrims who came for the religious event. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, in his Easter message refers to the fact that the Roman governor, Pilate would have been coming into Jerusalem on a warhorse, accompanied by the Roman soldiers. It would have been a procession to display the power of Rome to those coming on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Pilate himself represented the Caesars who claimed the title Son of God for themselves. Everything about Pilate's entrance into Jerusalem would have shouted out to the crowds coming for Passover, be afraid! See how much power we have here! Be afraid!

Jesus would have made his entrance at about the same time on the other side of the city. But Jesus came in riding on a donkey, the symbol of the Prince of Peace. He didn't come with an army he brought only himself and the love of God. What a contrast to the imperial power of the day! Jesus came saying, as our Presiding Bishop pointed out, God has another way. Secular power and violence is not the way of God! Jesus shows the world the way of God is unselfish, sacrificial love. The way of Jesus is to love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus says, be not afraid!

On Thursday evening at Jesus' arrest it seems that the world is right, be afraid. Jesus is taken, judged and turned over to the Romans who put him to death. They have the power and use it to tell others to be afraid of the power that the religious authorities and then Rome have over people's lives. When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to the tomb it is guarded, with the approval of Pilate, by soldiers from the Temple sent by the religious authorities to make it secure. Suddenly an angel appears and the guards shook and become like dead men. The power that put Jesus to death is powerless in the face of God's messenger. The way of the unselfish, sacrificial love of God overcomes all earthly power, even the power of death itself.

The women see the empty tomb and run as messengers themselves, the first apostles, to tell the other disciples. The women have overcome their fear and rush to share the joy. They have their mission and while they are doing their God given mission, Jesus meets them on the road. He tells them to not be afraid, but to go and tell his disciples, the ones who had deserted him and denied him that he will meet them in Galilee. Galilee, where they were first called by Jesus and accompanied him in his ministry. The circle is complete. They are returning to the beginning, but with new lives in Christ.

When Jesus had told his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem to raise Lazarus from death, their reaction was, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you and you are going there again?” Even with Jesus with them, they were afraid of the religious authorities. At Jesus’ arrest all the disciples fled in fear. Peter denied Jesus three times after proclaiming that he would follow Jesus even to death. But in his fear he denied even knowing Jesus. After Jesus’ resurrection Peter has the courage to tell others that he is a disciple of Jesus Christ, and finally will face his own death. He is no longer afraid. Everything has been made new!

People in our country and our world today are afraid. Afraid of being deported as an immigrant, lack of job security or even having a job that pays a living wage. People fear being killed or shot in our schools, churches, homes and neighborhoods by people that should not have access to guns. People are afraid of being hurt because of their race or sexuality. When will the next war begin? Fear is rampant in our country and in our world. When I mention that I am going to Jerusalem in May, people have told me to be wary, be careful. In other words, be afraid. Jesus met the violence of his world, the violence and power that say be afraid and through his death and resurrection gave us new life in him. His resurrection tells us to not be afraid, that as his followers we are to go into the world in his Name bringing hope to those who are living in fear. Following Jesus is accepting that the world is dangerous, but Jesus is walking with us and even if we die we live in Him. We are to take his love out to a hurting and violent world, one that says to be afraid.

The angel told the women that Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee and that they should meet him there with the other disciples. They left their fear behind and went to meet him in Galilee after his resurrection. They continued to find him with them as they healed, fed, taught and even in places of suffering. Jesus was with them, saying be not afraid! Jesus calls us to move beyond our fears, knowing that he will be with us as we heal, feed, teach and even enter into places of suffering in our own lives. We are blessed as we move beyond our fears to trust in God and follow the way of Jesus.

As our Presiding Bishop said in his Easter message, God’s way is one of unselfish, sacrificial love that overcomes all fear. The Easter message is that Love Wins! Now follow the way of Jesus and bless the world!