

Fear and Great Joy

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

God of life, your Spirit raised Jesus from the dead.
Your Spirit inspired the prophets and writers of Scripture.
Your Spirit draws us to Christ and helps us to acknowledge him as Lord.
We ask that you send your Spirit now to give us
deeper insight, encouragement, faith, and hope
through the proclamation of the Easter gospel. Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10 (NRSVue)

¹ After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² 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. ³ His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he^[a] lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead,^[b] and indeed he is going ahead of

you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – "Fear and Great Joy"

Moravians have an interesting name for the cemetery – "God's Acre." They call it a "living graveyard." God's Acre is considered a field, where bodies are "sown as perishable seed" to await the day when they will be raised in an "imperishable form." Deceased loved ones are buried under simple white stones that are laid flat to signify equality in death—rich and poor, male and female have the same stone. Each Moravian congregation was divided up into groups called "choirs." Choirs were grouped according to age and gender. The different choirs not only sat together in worship, they were buried together in God's Acre. Not by your family of origin, but by who you were seated next to in church.

During Holy Week, the Moravians come to God's Acre with brushes and pails to scrub and scour away a year's worth of grime on the gravestones. On Holy Saturday, Easter Eve, they put a bouquet of fresh flowers on each one of the white stones—the boneyard becomes a botanical garden. On Easter morning, they meet before dawn on the lawn, and at the sound of the Moravian Funeral band, they march to the song "God's Acre" and celebrate the resurrection among the saints in a cemetery Sunrise Service. One Moravian described the Sunrise Easter Service this way, "It's an emotional experience to be surrounded by the graves of our ancestors. And I like to think my grandparents and their grandparents before them are listening. And so I do my best to get the music right."

In our story, Mary and Mary were unknowingly going to God's Acre on that first Easter Morning. It was dawn, but it seemed more like dusk. Their beloved Rabbi was dead. But as morning broke on their way to the tomb, they had an earth-shattering and ground-breaking experience. The women encountered an angel. Not just any angel. It was an Angel of the Lord. This is the Angel of the Lord's third appearance in Matthew's gospel. And each angelic visitation began with the same command: "*Be not afraid.*" Be not afraid is also the most repeated command in the Scriptures. This is a good news command: "*Be not afraid.*"

We don't have to live a frantic or fearful life. Life, not death, has the final say. God has our back. God is intervening, breaking into the scene. God's messenger had a lightning face and snow-colored robe. The earth literally quaked at the angel's appearance.

The scene is ironic: Jesus, the dead man in the tomb, is alive. And the Roman guards outside the tomb are scared to death. The women are told not to fear, but the angel doesn't tell that to the guards. They have every reason to fear. So the angel descended from heaven, rolled away the stone, and—to put an exclamation point on it—triumphantly sat on the gravestone.

With the resurrection, the grave is transformed into "God's Acre." The Tomb devours death, but not the dead. The House of the Dead becomes the Mansion of Life. The angel was presiding at a funeral service . . . not for Jesus, but for death itself.

Now we *homo sapiens* have this instinct of survival. We not only want to evade death, we want to be perpetually young. Our culture today is obsessed—frantically looking for that Fountain of Youth. So we try to trick ourselves into thinking that we can actually cheat death. We can live longer now. We have good medical care. We've learned about the importance of good diet, exercise, sunscreen, seat belts, and botox. But we're really only delaying the inevitable.



What's different about Jesus' resurrection remedy is more than skin deep. His life transforms the very core of our being. We study the words and works of great figures in history who are long deceased. With Jesus, we not only study his words and works, but his living presence is working in us. We can trust him because he's the only one who's ever survived death. With this kind of life he offers—we don't have to be afraid of death.

Be not afraid. He has been raised—just as he said. The resurrection not only happened, but it has happened *for you*. In Christ, you not only can turn over a new leaf, you can turn over a new life. God not only bursts open tombs, but he bursts open attitudes, histories, and ways of thinking we've been imprisoned in. God's commands not only tell us what to do. God's commands give us the strength to do it. *Be not afraid.* Resurrection chases away

the fear that paralyzes us. We're set free. We can go quickly and tell the good news.

And who was first to hear this good news? Two women, Mary and Mary. The same two women who stayed by Jesus' side as he hung on the cross. The twelve disciples fled, but Mary and Mary stayed. And these same two women were the first to learn of the resurrection from the angel. The first to lay eyes upon the resurrected Jesus. The first commissioned evangelists to the Easter gospel. The angel tells them: Go quickly. Jesus is on the move. He's not here. He's alive and well and a step ahead of you. He'll meet you in Galilee, on the mountain top, and you'll get instructions from there. You'll be given a purpose. A task. A mission. Tell the disciples. It's just as he promised. And they did it—with reverence and great joy. They couldn't keep it to themselves.

Good news is meant to be shared. We've got to tell others about that new restaurant we've discovered. The birth of a new child or grandchild. We post on Facebook or Instagram about an

inspiring book we've read, or a great new band we just listened to. *How much more* we've got to get out the word that *death is defeated*. To look for Jesus you have to look ahead.

There's a paradox here. Jesus is always with us—to the end of the age. But at the same time our whole life is but a story of playing catch up to the resurrected Jesus. He comes to us from the future. If you want to find him—look ahead of you. Jesus keeps us moving forward, rather than living in the past. So the women followed the angel's command to beat it. They ran. And lo and behold, who do they run into? Jesus. "Greetings!" In Greek this can be translated as "Hello." It also can be translated, "Rejoice!" They clasped the feet of Jesus and worshiped him. This is the proper response to Jesus. If you want to know what life is all about, what the meaning of it all is. If you're looking for abundant life—it's found at the feet of Jesus. Throw yourself at his feet. Hit the ground.

The great author G.K. Chesterton was once asked this question. "What would you do if Jesus Christ were standing here, right now?" Chesterton's response: "*He is.*" What if Jesus appeared in our sanctuary right now? "*He is.*" We just need the eyes of faith to see God at work all around us. Jesus gave the same message to the two women as the angel did: "*Be not afraid.*" Go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee—there they will see me. My brothers. Not my disciples, my *brothers*. Jesus still has an abiding affection for his disciples, even though they deserted him. This is the good news: Despite our betrayal and denial . . . we're still God's children. We're Jesus' little brothers and sisters in the family of God. And he's not ashamed of us. Be not afraid. Go quickly and tell the good news. Resurrection leads to mission.

Amen.



Sermon Art:

"I Am the Resurrection and the Life", Greg Tricker

"The Resurrection", Vera Atkarskaya, 1956 in the Ukraine, Galerie Zwiener

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