

Do not be afraid. Go. And tell.

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC on Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

Do not be afraid. Words said to calm fears when we do not know what might happen next or even what is happening now. Do not be afraid. It's spoken numerous times in Scripture, when one from the realm of heaven makes an entrance and try to quell the nerves of humans. When Gabriel tells Mary in Luke's Gospel that she is to bear the son of God, he says, "Do not be afraid." When Peter and the disciples think they see a ghost and it is really just Jesus walking on the water, Jesus says, "do not be afraid."

To the women who found the empty tomb, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." Easy for him to say, right!? Just a couple of days before, they had seen his beaten, lifeless body removed from a cross, Rome's most brutal and humiliating way to get rid of those who would challenge the Empire, even in an out-of-the-way place like Jerusalem in Judea. "Do not be afraid," they heard. They were literally taking their lives in their own hands by visiting the grave of an executed criminal, especially a grave watched over by Roman soldiers. It was the second time in a matter of minutes that they heard these words. The angel of the Lord who rolled away the stone from in front of the tomb said the same thing when they first saw him. The angel at the tomb in Mark's Gospel says the same thing to the women, and in Luke's Gospel, Jesus, in another post-resurrection scene, uses those same words to allay the fears of the disciples who have seen him appear in the room.

But let's be honest. How many times when someone says "Do not be afraid" do our fears suddenly evaporate? It's like telling someone who is in search of a restroom to just not think about it. It's all they are going to think about! It's like when someone says "don't worry" or "calm down" we often have to hear it said multiple times before it begins to sink in. And in this moment with the two Marys, how can they be anything but afraid. Their teacher, their friend, and the one they believed to be the Messiah, they are told his has been raised in one instant, and in the next, he stands in front of them.

More important, and I dare say more effective, than being told do not be afraid, both the angel of the Lord and Jesus himself tell the women to "Go." The two Marys are not allowed to stay where they are, afraid or not. They are sent as the first apostles and missionaries of the resurrection to tell Jesus' disciples, his brothers, he calls them, what has happened to him and where they can find him. In fact, in all four Gospels, those who are witnesses to Jesus' resurrection are told they cannot stay where they are. They have to go. And tell. Tell what they saw and what they know, even if their voice is shaky, even if it seems an idle tale or a crazy story. Even if they are not totally sure they believe it themselves or what it means.

There are plenty of things to be afraid of in this world. There always have been. One of the downsides of humanity is that when we eradicate one fear, the world creates something to take its place. Whether it's saber-rattle with a hostile country, a health crisis for us or a loved one, wondering whether our job will be around next year or if our retirement savings is going to last. Rural communities across the country, including North Carolina, are watching their local hospitals close and are fearful of what happens if there's a real emergency. Or it could be one of a hundreds of things that could be weighing on your mind right now. Every one of those concerns is valid and true.

When the Word of God took on flesh and blood in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, it was in Roman-occupied Palestine. It was a time and a place with an entirely different set of things to fear. At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, the Roman Empire did their very best to break him, humiliate him, strip God-in-the-person-of-Jesus down to nothing. But God cannot be broken. Because God is never still. The resurrection of Jesus calls us to go and to tell because that's what God has been calling people to do since God first created humanity. God called Noah to go and build an ark. God called Abraham to go to a new land. God called Moses to go and set the Israelites free from Egypt. God called Samuel to go and anoint a boy, David, to be the king of Israel. No one expected God to do these things. But they happened. And even with all that history, no one expected God to raise Jesus from the dead.

But God cannot be broken. And God will not always do what we expect to do. The resurrection of Jesus empowers us, implores us to seek out those who need to hear of his resurrection and the hope that it brings to the world. Jesus' resurrection may have happened once, many years ago, but the power of that mighty act continues to be evident to us 2,000 years later. Stories of people who may very well have been afraid, but as they told of the redeeming love of Christ, their fear dissipated. People whose faith called them to actions of hope and healing and reconciliation told of the story of a Resurrected Christ and a God who will not be broken. Stories of people going to a tomb and finding new life. A recreation area near Coral Gables, FL, called Douglas Park was closed in 2013 because of contamination¹. It had been written off as unusable and toxic. But a group of residents said, "No. We want this park and we need this park and we are going to bring it back to life." Through the tireless work of both volunteers and decontamination experts, the park reopened this past December bringing new life and vitality to their community. It doesn't take rebuilding a park. It could be a kind gesture, a phone call that you've been meaning to make or "hello" that leads to a conversation that gives life and erases fear.

Each of us are witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus. It's all around us, every day. We get to decide if we are going to stay at the tomb or if we are going to go and tell through our words and actions. One of those choices keeps us where we are and will always allow fear to overtake us. The other choice brings life to us and to others. So let's go. Let's tell of God's power to do the unexpected and to bring new life to the places where it is needed.

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¹ <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/coconut-grove/article88281422.html>