

DO NOT BE AFRAID

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(For my St. Aidan's members this is not exactly the sermon that was preached on Sunday morning. Given the death of our parish secretary's husband on Saturday night I altered the sermon, but that was a very personal sermon for our parish alone. Here is the sermon as I originally wrote it and am putting it up on the website.)

This Holy Week there have been several phrases that have been resonating in my mind as I worked on the various sermons. For Maundy Thursday it was the opening of the hymn, What wondrous love is this. For Good Friday it was, 'it is finished.' Today, this glorious Easter Day the phrase is "do not be afraid." Do not be afraid only appears in the resurrection story of Matthew. Why is that and what does it mean?

Each of the gospels offers us a very different picture of what happened on that glorious morning. Now this causes problems for some people. Many an agnostic author has said, you would think that on something as important as the resurrection the four gospels would agree and be consistent. True if you assume that the gospels are written to be historically accurate accounts. However that is not how they are written.

First of all each gospel is written from a unique perspective. When I was a teacher I had two friends who team taught in one of those open classrooms that were so popular in the 1980s and 90s. One day Dick had built this elaborate tower with glass plates and wooden blocks. Glenn comes running into the class and says, Mr. Phenn I'm tired of you doing these crazy projects on class time and I've had it. He then took out a baseball bat and shattered the tower. Dick immediately told the kids to take out their notebooks and write down what happened so that he could give this evidence to the principal. Well naturally every story was different and this was all a lesson in point of view and perspective. The four gospels are all written from unique perspectives.

Each gospel writer or community is unique in their time, place, audience and most important message that they are trying to convey. It is as if each gospel is a different news organization, writing for their individual audience. Barry retired TV news man said that each had their own spin on the story. Mark is like our local news, just a small organization conveying a local perspective. Details are often left out because the audience knows them without them being said. Luke is more of your national news group reporting to a larger audience with more detail and broader perspective. John is the equivalent of NPR, a very different agenda involved with depicting the behind the scenes action and going on at length about theology and relationships with the Father and the Son. Matthew our gospel today is focused on

not just the facts but presenting them in a way that is going to affect public opinion, sort of a FOX news broadcast if you will. Matthew is trying to persuade the Jewish population of the 70s that Jesus is the Messiah and this is the way Judaism is supposed to head in the time following the destruction of the temple in the revolts of the late 60s.

Therefore Matthew portrays the resurrection in very different terms. "Tell my brothers what has happened and to go to Galilee where we will gather." In Luke they gather and hide in fear. In John they simply go back to their lives before Jesus interrupted it. In Mark they run away and say nothing. But in Matthew they go forward to Galilee to meet their risen lord. They go in expectation, in hope and most of all in faith.

The key difference in Matthew is that moment when the earthquake happens, the angel appears, rolls back the stone and says "Do not be afraid." Jesus says to the Marys "do not be afraid." This sequence of events is unique to Matthew and only Matthew uses the angelic greeting of "Do not be afraid." The angel Gabriel in Luke greets Mary with these words and the angel who tells the shepherd in the fields also says this, but only in this resurrection appearance does Matthew use these words. Why? What does this mean to us today?

Do not be afraid can also be read as have faith. For Matthew and for all of us we need to realize that the theological opposite of fear is faith. The angel is telling the Marys you do not need to fear, in fact you will not be fearful if you have faith. This is why the disciples are not hiding in Matthew, they have faith and we are expected to have faith and then respond to Christ's call to go ahead to Galilee where they will meet Jesus, the risen Christ and be told what to do.

Now for many of us the reaction of the disciples in John to just go back to the way things were or for Luke to hide in difficult, challenging, fearful times seems the easier route. How much more challenging is it for us to move forward in faith? The challenge is to trust God and step out and move forward in the faith that God knows what God is doing.

We can look at the state of the church in our country and in the world and be fearful or we can look out and have the faith that says, God is about to do, no God is doing something new in our lives, don't be afraid have faith. Many people fear what is happening. But any person involved in strategic planning will tell you that in every threat there is an opportunity. In every weakness in an organization is an opportunity for change and renewal. I believe God is looking for a church with people whose faith is deep and not superficial. The Holy Spirit wants believers who will act in faith, get outside these walls and spread the gospel as is commanded in the end of Matthew. I believe the Spirit is tired of churches filled with pew potatoes. People who come sit in the pew, mutter a nice sermon to the priest on the way out the door and never allow the gospel message to reach into their hearts and challenge them.

Paul Tillich writes that doubt is the consequence of true faith. It is easy to be faithful when life is good even if your faith is shallow. This reminds me of two elderly women that were on a trip through Europe. As we traveled especially in Italy the refrain was, well Father says and then drop some pearl of religious wisdom. I wanted to look them in the eye and ask them if they believed anything at all or did they simply parrot Father whomever's statements. If questions arise hold onto your simple answers and pretend they don't exist. True faith forces us to ask the difficult questions and be willing to live with the doubts that those questions can bring to the surface. True faith sustains us in the face of adversity and times of trial. This is a faith that teaches while we cannot begin to understand God's ways, we believe the ultimately God is in control. True faith allows us to be angry at God when we don't understand or feel abandoned by God.

But just having faith is not enough for Matthew. Ultimately we are not only called on by Matthew be rid of fear and replace it with faith, but then to share that gift of faith with a fearful world. This is the message that Matthew is working so hard to teach us in his version of the resurrection. His message to the leaders of Jerusalem was that Jesus is the messiah and that we are called to spread that gospel everywhere.

Remember it is in Matthew that we have the great commission to go out into the world making disciples and baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

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