

March 27, 2005



Too Afraid To Believe

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Matthew 28:1-10

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightening, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you."

So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him.

Then Jesus said to them, "*Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.*"

What was the first reaction to the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

The first women who found the tomb - empty...

The first people who spoke with the angels...

The first people who heard the good news...

The first people who saw the risen Christ...

What was their first reaction?

Did they shout “Hallelujah!”?
 Did they jump up and down?
 Did they sing a happy song?
 Did they put on new spring dresses,
 and decorate their hair with flowers?
 Did they smile and laugh for joy?

No, they didn’t do any of that.

They were afraid.

Think about that. Their first reaction was fear.

Mark, in his gospel, put it this way. He had Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome going to the tomb. Mark wrote, those women “... fled from the tomb... trembling... for they were afraid.” [Mark 16:7-8]

Luke wrote something very similar. He wrote that the women went to the tomb, and when they found it empty, “... they were perplexed... and frightened.” [Luke 24:4-5]

You’d think their first response would have been joy, but it was fear. And the first thing the angel had to say to them was, “Don’t be afraid.” [Matthew 28:5]

But they were afraid.

Even after they had met the angel,
 - even after they had seen the empty tomb,
 - even after they had heard the news that Jesus had risen,
 - even after they had left the graveyard and hurried back
 toward town,
 - even then,
 - when they met Jesus himself on the road...
 - they were still afraid.

And the first thing Jesus had to say to them was, “*Do not be afraid.*” [Matthew 28:10]

And coming-in on the heels of fear was dis-belief. You could say they were so afraid of the good news that they refused to believe it.

In Mark, when the women told their friends what had happened, their friends, “... would not believe.” [Mark 16:10-11] And when the rest of the disciples were told, “... they did not believe.” [Mark 16:13]

Luke said when the women told the disciples, "... they did not believe" the women. [Luke 24:11]

Even later when Jesus, himself, appeared to the eleven disciples, "... they were startled and frightened..." [Luke 24:37] Even then, they would not believe what was right in front of their eyes.

They were all just too afraid to believe. Can you blame them?

After all, a dead person just doesn't get up out of his grave and start living again. That just doesn't happen.

Whatever else the first followers of Jesus might have believed,

- whatever else they might have thought would happen,

- whatever else they might have hoped -

- they never really expected Jesus to rise from the dead!

That was the last thing on their minds, even though Jesus had told them it was going to happen. They were so afraid of death, that they couldn't believe in life.

When they walked into the empty tomb,

- when they heard the angel's message,

- even when they met Jesus on the road -

- their first reaction was fear and disbelief.

When Jesus walked up to them and said, "How's it going?", they didn't act like the team members and fans of my university two weeks ago when they won their conference basketball championship.

They didn't jump up and down.

They didn't scream and cheer.

They didn't hug and kiss and slap high fives all around.

They didn't smile and sing the school song,

and chant, O-H-I-O over and over again.

Those first witnesses to the resurrection didn't do any of the things a person is supposed to do when he or she is really, really happy.

Instead, they were afraid.

They were terrified.

They did not believe.

Why do you think they were so afraid?

I've come up with three possible reasons for that.

Reason Number One: maybe they were afraid because if Jesus came back to life, that meant that you can't get away from God.

Think about what that means. You can't get away from God even when you think he's dead!

You can nail him to a cross.

You can stick a spear into his side.

You can laugh at him and ridicule him.

You can turn your back on him and walk away.

You can take his lifeless body and put it in a cave.

You can roll a stone across the doorway and think you've put an end to that.

After you've done all of that, as far as you're concerned, he's dead and done with.

BUT - if the resurrection is true -

He still knows what you're doing.

He knows what you do when you turn off the lights.

He knows what you do when you lock the door and pull down the shades.

He knows what you do when you're five hundred miles away from home.

He knows what you think, and what you want, and what you desire.

You may think he's dead, but you're wrong. There's no getting away from God.

Remember a couple of decades ago when Time Magazine declared that "God Is Dead"? You may have made that same declaration. You may have signed your personal declaration of independence from God. You may think that you can do without him.

Maybe you've been deceived by your current good health, or your personal wealth, or your activity-filled days and nights-full of clubs and meetings, or your large circle of fun-time friends.

You may think you've grown too smart to buy into that God business any more. You may think you've outgrown your need for faith and the church. You may call it all old-fashioned, and out-of-date, and just a silly superstition.

But, if the resurrection is true - the joke's on you! God's still watching. He still knows you. He's still keeping track of what you do.

Maybe the Mary's had a good reason to be afraid.

Reason Number Two: maybe they were afraid because Jesus' resurrection upset their plans. They had it all worked out; but when Jesus came back to life, it changed everything.

All of the followers of Jesus were confused and disheartened by his death. Those who were there cried at the cross; they cried at the tomb. All the rest of them cried in the safety of their homes.

But human nature being what it is: it didn't take them long to accept the fact that Jesus was dead. They resigned themselves to that fact.

So, after he died, they cried for a while; then, they picked up the pieces of their shattered lives, and they decided to go on without him. They came to peace with the idea of living without Jesus. They tied up all their memories of Jesus with a pretty, silk ribbon, and consigned Jesus to their box of memories.

They did what we all have to do when somebody we love dies: they came to terms with his death. After the tears, you learn to carry on.

So, it came as a complete surprise to the Mary's when they found out that Jesus had risen from the dead. He came back! And that changed everything!

Their whole world which had tumbled down, had been twisted and turned and changed all around again.

Think what that meant to them that morning. He had died. They buried him. They mourned him. And, they adjusted to that sad fact. But now he was alive again. What did that mean?

Think what that could mean to you?

He died. And you cashed-in his C.D.'s

He died. And you already notified Social Security.

He died. And you put the house on the market.

He died. And you gave all his clothes to the Salvation Army.

He died. And you filled-up the empty space he left with
somebody else.

But now, he's alive again! What does that mean?

That's a scary thought.

Jesus was alive again. What did that news mean to the Mary's that morning? How was their life going to change, now? It's no wonder they were afraid.

Reason Number Three: maybe the news that Jesus had come back to life also meant that some other things came back, too.

When they buried Jesus in the tomb, they buried some other baggage along with him.

They buried their hopes and dreams for a messianic kingdom. When Jesus was around, they had plans for the future. They pictured Jesus sitting on the throne in Jerusalem. They imagined their powerful army driving the Romans far away from the Promised Land. They pictured great wealth and a promising tomorrow. But when he died, those dreams died, too.

They buried all the love and care Jesus had poured out on the world. They remembered his words of assurance and pardon and grace. They saw him love the unlovely. They watched him care for the life-worn. They experienced his healing of the bruised ones. When he died, they buried all those good things, too.

But that wasn't all! They also buried a lot of things they wanted to forget.

They buried their self-centered quarrels about which one was greatest.

They buried their petty jealousies.

They buried those sordid scenes of denial and betrayal.

They buried the memories of how each one of them had let Jesus down.

Oh, yes, they put all of that in the tomb with Jesus, and said "good riddance!"

It's human nature. They probably figured that when they buried Jesus, they could put all those ugly things behind them. So, they closed-up that tomb with a great, big rock and they said good-bye.

Good-bye to their cowardice,

Good-bye to their failures,

Good-bye to their dashed hopes.

They were happy to put away the thought that when the going got tough, they ran away. They were relieved to cover-up the self-realization

that they had never, really understood Jesus at all. They were released from the knowledge that they had let Jesus down.

Oh, yes, they buried all of that. And when they had walked away from that sealed-up tomb, they thought they could pick up the broken pieces of their lives and glue them back together again. They thought they could gather together all their shattered illusions about their own worthiness and get on with life.

But then,

- when the great good news of Easter morning sunk into their souls,
- when they accepted the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead,
- when they knew that Jesus was, indeed, the Christ and Savior of all -
- all those other things came back to life, too!

In an instant, they knew they were going to be seeing Jesus again, face-to-face. They'd have to see him and talk with him, even though they had betrayed him, even though they had let him down, even though they had denied him.

In a flash, they knew there was no forgetting! All those bad things they thought they had buried were resurrected, too. It's no wonder they were afraid.

Does that idea scare you?

That's why the angel said, "Don't be afraid." That's why Jesus said, "*Do not be afraid.*"

There is so much good news to hear on Easter morning, but I don't want you to forget to hear this bit of good news: don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid, because the one who brings everything back to life is the one who loves you, anyway.

He's the one who gave himself for you, just as you are.

He's the one who won't let you escape, or forget.

He's the one who remembers it all, and forgives you, anyway.

He's the one who takes death and makes life.

He's the one who un-buries your regrets and makes them something of which to be proud.

Don't be afraid.

You don't have to run away from God, anymore.
You don't have to try to hide your shame.
You don't even have to pretend.
Jesus Christ came back to life to open-up all the shut doors:
the doors of fear,
the doors of guilt and anxiety and insecurity -
the doors your secret selfishness sins slammed shut.
Don't be afraid.
It's good news that comes out of a graveyard.
Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.
And all the doors you thought had been closed forever have now
been re-opened and transformed.
Don't be afraid.
Let yourself believe.
Believe that God will give you the ability to live your life
with joy and assurance.
Believe that you will be forgiven.
Believe that you have great worth,
that your life is a pearl of great price,
that you are, indeed, a buried treasure.
Believe that God will transform your mistakes into blessings.
Believe that you can accomplish great things!
May God bless you this Easter day,
and send His marvelous power,
into your life.
So you can live your life with
no fear,
but a lot of faith!