

Afraid Yet Filled With Joy

Matthew 28:1-10

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Our story begins in a world that looks just as it did when Jesus breathed his last. Rome is still in power. The cross is still a symbol of terror. The disciples are still hiding. Grief still hangs heavy in the air.

In the early morning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary walk to the tomb carrying spices in their hands, despair in their hearts. After all, just days before, they watched as Jesus was crucified by a system that feared truth and protected power - executed by the state, condemned by religious authority, abandoned by many of His followers. The world, it seemed, had chosen injustice over truth, violence over love.

No sooner do they arrive at the burial site, than the ground beneath their feet begins to shake. The earth quakes, causing them to lose their balance, perhaps fall over, and to tremble in fear and uncertainty. As if that isn't frightening enough, an angel descends from above and rolls the stone that blocks the tomb away. The angel, bright with light, speaks into their fear: "Do not be afraid... He is not here; for He has been raised."

At the angel's urging, they run quickly away - afraid but filled with joy - to tell the disciples this momentous news. Jesus is alive! He is risen! Then, right in the middle of their path, standing before them, Jesus is there, in the flesh, flesh they can wrap their arms around. He, too, says to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

"Do not be afraid". They are words meant to be reassuring, I'm sure, but they seem completely at odds with the women's experience. Earthquake. Angel. Empty tomb. Risen Christ. They have literally just seen a dead man walking and talking, alive again. How can they possibly not be afraid?

It is not hard to recognize the feeling of those women at the tomb: the sense that the world is not as it should be...that something precious has been lost...that hope feels buried. Because the forces that nailed Jesus to the cross—fear, injustice, oppression, abuse of power—are not relics of the past. They are still very present in our world today.

We gather this Easter in a world still marked by war, displacement, injustice, and fear. We see it in the growing conflicts in the Middle East, in families displaced, in communities wounded by violence. We see it in systems that prioritize profit over people, truth distorted for power, and justice delayed for the vulnerable.

And these are not events far removed from us. We experience their impact every day - the challenge of making ends meet when food and gas prices keep increasing, the loss of jobs or health insurance, the fall of institutions we were taught were fair and just, the crossing of boundaries that define human decency and social behaviors.

Our world today still looks an awful lot like it did on Good Friday.

And yet, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid”. Do not be afraid because I am risen - I am risen and so there is, and will always be, hope. God was not silent in the face of injustice and cruelty 2,000 years ago, and God isn’t silent today. Easter declares that God will not leave the powerful to scapegoat the marginalized or trample the oppressed. God will not leave us in the wilderness. God will not allow us to destroy ourselves.

No! Christ’s resurrection is God’s defiant declaration that injustice is real but it is not ultimate. Suffering is powerful but it is not final. Death is present but it does not win. Not on a cross 2,000 years ago and not today.

Easter shouts from the mountaintops, “Good has triumphed over evil!” “Love wins!”

That’s why the message begins with “Do not be afraid.” Because fear is the language of the powerful. But love is the language of resurrection - love breaks the grip of fear and transforms it into hope and joy.

That doesn’t mean that fear leaves us completely. Remember, the women ran - afraid but filled with joy. But fear no longer holds them back, cowering, despairing. As it has since the beginning, the hope of Easter releases us from the paralysis of fear and calls us into action. The women ran from the tomb to share the good news of God’s love for us, for all. Just as it has been for centuries, the hope of Easter is embodied in people who refuse to let injustice, cruelty, or power plays define reality.

The hope of Easter emboldened Martin Luther King Jr. to proclaim the power of love in the face of violence, trusting that justice would rise even when the evidence said otherwise.

The hope of Easter strengthened Óscar Romero to speak against oppression until it cost him his life—believing that even death could not silence truth.

The hope of Easter led Mary McLeod Bethune to advocate for African American women’s rights and for educational opportunities for African American youth.

The hope of Easter fueled Dorothy Day as she started a pacifist movement that came to the aid of the poor and homeless and also advocated for them.

The hope of Easter is found in the actions of everyday people acting out of deep love and respect for humanity right now, today. Aid workers risking their lives in war zones, journalists telling the truth in dangerous places, communities rebuilding after devastation, protesters demanding peace and dignity, even when ignored.

These are not just witnesses to the resurrection—they embody it. Were they ever afraid? Of course! Yet, they have found purpose and joy living in the tension between fear and hope. Which is, of course, what we are called to, as well. Easter faith is not meant to be kept inside the tomb. It sends us out. God works through us so that others can see in our choices and actions that ultimately love wins. We may carry anxiety about the future, grieve losses that have not yet been

restored, wonder what, after this earthquake, will remain standing. Yet, Easter gives us a steady, quiet, stubborn hope that overcomes the paralysis of fear and sends us into the world to make a tangible difference in the name of love.

To live as resurrection people is to:

- To stand with the oppressed, even when it costs us something
- To speak truth in places shaped by silence
- To embody hope when cynicism feels easier
- To roll away stones—literal and metaphorical—that keep others trapped in cycles of poverty, brokenness, and loss

Every act of justice, every gesture of mercy, every word of hope is a small echo of that first Easter morning, a contribution to God’s ongoing work of resurrection. So, what will you do when you leave this place to play your part? How will you bring love and hope to the many dark tombs surrounding us?

Whatever you choose, however you participate in the hope of resurrection today and tomorrow and beyond, open your hearts to the power of love to transform fear into compassion.

Do not be afraid. Not because the world is not broken. Not because injustice is not real. But because Christ is risen—and in Him, life is stronger than death, love is stronger than hate, and hope is stronger than despair (1 Corinthians 15:54–57).

The stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. And the story is not over. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.