

Fear and Joy

Matthew 28:1-10

Twice in the last week or so, we've experienced what we usually do in Iowa in the spring – severe weather. Wind and rain, thunder and lightning, hail and more. Warnings and watches came and went, trying to make sure we were properly afraid of the destructive power of the storms.

The challenge when weather events like that come to us is a way to balance the fear with the hope. Yes, you need to watch and make sure you're not caught outside in a hailstorm or unprotected in a tornado. But you don't need to be paralyzed by fear either.

We live in a world that makes us want to be afraid. What else is making you afraid? What keeps you up at night? Is it your finances? Maybe it's the fear you get looking at your property assessment and being afraid of how much your property tax will go up. Maybe it's that your tax refund isn't going to be as big as you hoped, or you'll have to pay in more than you thought. Maybe your fears are medical, waiting for test results or treatment plans. Maybe it's fear for your children, after yet another school shooting, or watching them struggle in school. There's a lot for us to be afraid of.

Fear is one of the devil's best tricks. Can you think of a single instance when fear led you to behave your best? Sometimes, it's even when we're feeling the most blessed that we're the most afraid. The more we have, the more we have to lose, and the more we fear losing what we have. When fear works like that, it leads to other problems. As Yoda said, "Fear leads to

anger; anger leads to hate; hate leads to suffering."

Fear is a part of the Easter story, though we don't always think of it that way. We expect the joy on Easter, but sometimes forget the fear. On that first Easter morning, the disciples were afraid, hiding in the upper room, fearing that what happened to Jesus could happen to them, as well. Jesus had been crucified because, among other reasons, the Pharisees feared the popularity of Jesus, and Pontius Pilate feared the unrest that could occur. Fear was all around.

The women were afraid, as well. They were afraid of how their lives would change. They'd been following Jesus, and now that seemed over. Then, when they went to the tomb, felt the earthquake, saw the guards frozen in fear and discovered it was empty and saw the angel sitting on the stone, their fear changed. They were not expecting a resurrection. They were expecting what they were familiar with; death. They were expecting to go to the tomb and prepare Jesus' body as they would have had there been time after he died. They were expecting to continue to walk in their grief, to mourn their friend and teacher. They were expecting to continue to mourn the future they had been expecting, the future Jesus had promised. When Jesus died, it was as if they had lost their own lives, as well. Even though Jesus had told them what was going to happen, seeing the angel and seeing the stone rolled away was out of their normal experiences, and filled them with fear.

Fear is the reflexive human response to an encounter with the supernatural. There's a

reason that the first words out of almost every angel's mouth are "Fear not."

When Jesus meets the women outside the tomb and shows them he is alive, their fear is overpowered by joy. Their lives are changed, but for the better! Instead of lives changed by death, they now live lives changed by resurrection. Jesus' resurrection has given them new life.

But that's not the end of the story. The new life the women have in Jesus isn't just for themselves. They are told to go tell the disciples what they have seen. But when the women left to go tell the disciples, they didn't just leave in fear. They left in fear and great joy. They knew nothing would ever be the same, and that was a good thing. They knew that Jesus had defeated death, and they no longer needed to fear death. As they go in fear and joy, they know their lives will never be the same, but they don't know for sure how their lives will be changed.

How can fear and joy go together? We see fear and joy together in big, life-changing events in our lives. Approaching a wedding may bring fear that something could go wrong, but there's great joy at the celebration and the marriage beginning. There may be joy at a graduation, but fear at the unknown that comes next. There may be joy as you bring a child home from the hospital, but fear about if you can handle all of the new responsibilities. There may be joy in retirement, but fear about finding purpose.

It's in the midst of our fear and fears that Jesus comes. Jesus enters into our world of fear with hope and peace. Fear alone is paralyzing, but fear and faith drive us to Jesus. Then, properly emboldened, we return, no longer paralyzed but

freed and enabled to show love to our neighbors. Easter is full of fear and joy.

We too, even when we live in fear, can live in great joy. We know that we no longer need to fear death because Jesus has defeated death. We know that the world was changed forever that first Easter morning. We know that Easter shows we no longer need to be afraid.

We often, I think, assume that great joy and fear are mutually exclusive, but Easter reminds us that they need not be. We can be both fearful and joyful. Yes, there is fear, about the economy, about politics, about war, about severe weather. We will leave this place and go home and the cares and concerns we have will still be there. The world will still be a beautiful and terrible place. But on this Easter Sunday we are also filled with great joy because we remember the promises of God. We know that God is faithful and is with us in our fears and in our joys. We know that Easter shows us God is at work making all things new, making everything right again,

We know that Jesus is risen, that death has been defeated. We know the empty tomb shows us that nothing can separate from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Risen Lord. We live in fear and joy. Alleluia! Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, alleluia!

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