

Fear ... and Great Joy
April 18, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:
Psalm 30:4-12
Matthew 28:1-10

I can't recall where I heard the phrase for the first time but it stuck with me.

"If it's odd, it's God."

That idea sticks with us because we know it's true.

Even the most intellectual, educated, high-church theologian knows what it means.

We've all had some unusual experience that escapes logical explanation, a time when we come away thinking that a divine hand was at work.

Just the other day, my father in law shared a story about his father, who was all but blind from macular degeneration.

One day he wandered into a pine forest near home and became lost.

To his dying day, my father in law said, he claimed that a crow led him home.

When the improbable occurs, we should keep our minds and hearts open to the possible, especially what is possible in and through our creator.

Today we continue a series of sermons that consider some of Jesus' post resurrection sayings.

The gospel accounts – and the book of Acts, for that matter – include a range of stories of how Christ appeared to his friends after rising from the tomb.

We shouldn't be in too big a hurry to move on from those precious days.

So throughout this series, we are lingering with the apostles ... in the garden ... on the road to Emmaus ... in the Upper Room ... and all of the other places they and others experienced the risen Christ.

If there were awards for the most dramatic, Matthew's account of the resurrection would be the clear winner.

An earthquake erupts ... an angel of the Lord descends from heaven -- appearing like lightening in garments robed "white as snow" to roll back the stone.

At the sight of the angel, the guards at the tomb literally shake in their boots.

The gospel says they appear like "dead men."

One can only imagine what Stephen Spielberg could do with this scene.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary witness all of it.

Then, to make the surreal even more so, the angel, the one who hovers there like a suspended bolt of lightning, to whom the two Mary's can hardly even turn their eyes, calmly says: "Don't be afraid."

To that we all might say, "Yeah, right!"

Surely, the two Marys might have said, "After the three most terrible days of our lives, we've come out here at risk of our own lives. The earth shakes. The tomb that held the body of the man we thought was the messiah is now empty after three days. These soldiers are standing here like a couple of zombies in a trance. An angel is sitting casually on a gigantic, virtually unmovable boulder. And you say, 'Don't be afraid. Don't freak out just yet. Be cool. Take a breath. Chill.' "

On the "If-it's-odd- it's-God" meter ... this has to be way up in the red zone, almost off the chart.

To give God credit, the angel didn't leave the two Marys hanging.

The angel calmly explained that Jesus had been raised and has gone ahead of the women to Galilee, where they will see him.

Not to say that explained everything, but it was something to go on.

Scripture concludes this scene this way:

"So they women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples."

* * *

They left with "fear and great joy."

Only a scene as fantastic as that could explain how the women felt fear and great joy at the same time.

We can't ever know what it must have been like, that once-in-creation moment.

The closest we might come may be moments when we felt multiple feelings in an instant.

One day when commuting to work together, Kelly and I were hit broadside by a truck.

I remember thinking:

- "What just happened?"
- "Am I alive?"
- "Is Kelly alive?"
- "Am I hurt?"
- "Is Kelly hurt?"
- "What the heck to I do now."

I'd estimate those thoughts took about three nanoseconds to rush through my mind.

Maybe you've had a moment when your child wandered away for a moment before turning up.

You felt absolute terror one moment ... profound relief the next.

Maybe moments like those are something vaguely similar to what the two Marys experienced that day at the mouth of the tomb.

Maybe moments like those give us some glimpse of what caused the two Marys to feel fear and great joy, two contradictory feelings, at once.

Still, the Marys found a way to move on, to go tell the apostles to go to Galilee to meet the risen Lord.

How do we move on in our own lives?

How do we put aside our fears to make way for more worthwhile emotions?

As I've said from this pulpit before, the phrase "Do not fear" is the most oft-repeated phrase in all of scripture.

One count determined it appears 365 times.

But for so many people, it's easier said than done.

How do we move on to meet Jesus?

Perhaps the first step is to ask what we're afraid of – and, then, whether we can do anything about it.

So much of our time is spent searching for what will happen next – asking what if ... this? And, what if ... that?

Yes, there are many things that are within our reach to effect.

We can take care of our health, manage our money, feed our relationships.

But unexpected illnesses can occur ... along with layoffs ... or personal crises in the lives of those closest to us.

So our fears remain:

In the middle of the night, we wonder what will happen next?

And, if it does, what will we do about it?

All the while, we are ruining today ... worrying about a tomorrow that might not – that probably won't – ever happen.

For example, as people of the church, we might engage in full-out panic over the future of the church as we know it.

Mainline denominations have experienced steady decline for decades.

The Presbyterian Church USA feels it as much as any, losing almost half of our membership in the last half century.

Should we spend our time wailing about it ... or disparaging all those people who aren't with us here on Sunday morning?

Should we defend the status quo ...and try desperately to sell it to generations of Americans who aren't buying?

Or do we quiet down and listen for the new?

Which approach invests in fear?

Which approach turns our face to find joy in what lies ahead?

What about our individual spiritual lives?

Is there an itch we are constantly scratching ... a need, a hunger of our own creation we cannot satiate?

Is our problem that we don't like the God we see in Jesus Christ?

Or is it that we don't like the person we see when we look in the mirror?

Is it that we blame God for the life we've been given?

Or that we don't like the discontent within ourselves of how we are living it?

In the book our adult Sunday school class is reading, called The Seven Next Words of Christ, the author, a Methodist leader named Shane Stanford, offers this perspective:

"... the real discontent of human existence is not fear; it is spiritual hunger – the desire for making sense of it all, and the hope that in some way or another it matters."

"Perhaps God came, not to take away our fears, but to alleviate this all-consuming hunger. If this is true, the nature of the Resurrection and of the entire Christian life for that matter, is not one of perseverance ... but of feasting on the promise of God's unfolding work of grace."¹

He continues: The "conclusion of Jesus' message (Do not be afraid) broadens the meaning by downplaying our fear and lifting up God's desire that we get on with the business of living."

* * *

That morning at the tomb, the two Marys might well have turned the other way and gone home.

They might have told their friends and neighbors that all the time they had spent following Jesus had been a mistake.

Upon hearing the news that the tomb was empty, the apostles might have taken up their nets and gone back to fishing for fish.

But they didn't because the two Marys did what the risen Christ asked them to do.

They got on with the business of living.

Though they were gripped by fear, the two Marys walked toward their joy.

They shared the news of the resurrection with the apostles.

¹ P.32

They trusted Jesus' promise that he would meet them there.

Reunited, they began the work of the new age, an age when peace, love and justice would advance, an age when hope overtakes death and grace overtakes sin.

We're still living in that age and the work the two Marys and the apostles took up in Galilee now rests in our hands.

As the church, the body of Christ, we are guided by the great commission that Christ gave his friends in Galilee – "Go and make disciples of all nations And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

None of this means that fear goes away. We should not pretend we don't feel fear.

It is one of the emotions God gave us. It is part of being made in God's image.

But, like the two Marys, God calls us to move forward.

In her popular book, Traveling Mercies, Anne Lamott writes that "grace meets us where we are ... but does not leave us where it found us."

What a life-giving promise!

That the same God who met the two Marys in their fear and called them forth to joy will meet us, wherever we are.

However deeply mired we may be in anxiety or depression ... however confused or lost ... however frozen by uncertainty ... God doesn't leave us there.

In Christ, God says:

"I know this all looks more than a little odd to you.

But don't worry. I am going ahead.

Let's meet up in Galilee.

There we will be reunited ... and we will get busy.

There's plenty of good work to do.

Now, go and tell your friends."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.