

“Do Not Be Afraid”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Easter Sunday – April 12, 2020

Matthew 28: 1-10

As Lisa, Jon, Jeff and I sit here in the sanctuary today, I can tell you it feels very strange. For the last four weeks, the four of us have been here leading worship in a very different way than we ever could have imagined. There are cables and cords strung along the floor, so that we can provide the best sound and video connections for our broadcast. Lisa and I looking into a little camera to talk to you, rather than seeing your faces and reactions in the pews in front of us. Having to look at ourselves while we lead worship – that has probably been the most unnerving part of all for me! We are glad to hear that this has been helpful to many of you to feel connected, comforted, and strengthened as we all have to remain physically distant from one another. And even though this is very unusual for us here, I think we’re slowly getting accustomed to this way of being in worship amid a health pandemic.

It’s even harder today, though, to be here with just the four of us for worship, because this Sunday is a day when this space would normally be filled with so many people. Members, friends, family, guests – this sanctuary and so many other worship spaces across our land would usually be packed to celebrate the joy of Easter morning. But it is not filled with people – as that is what we must do at this time to keep ourselves and our neighbors safe and well. We may not be here all together this Easter, but that does not change or diminish what God has done for us on Easter. This sanctuary may be relatively empty today – but guess what? The tomb is empty, as well.

One thing that we have done today is decorate the sanctuary with our Easter flowers. I am grateful to Nancy Orme and Ann Hamel for coming yesterday and arranging our tulips, lilies and daffodils here in this space. We decided to move down to the floor today so you all could see them better! Thank you to many of you who placed orders for the flowers, and know that if you would like to pick yours up this week, just contact me or Ann and we’ll be happy to make sure you can get them in the days ahead.

The last time our space was decorated with so many flowers was four months ago. It was the fourth Sunday of Advent, and instead of lilies, daffodils, and tulips, this space was filled with red and white poinsettias. Four months probably feels like four years, doesn’t it? There’s something about flowers and decorations in these special seasons of the church’s life that elicits memories of past celebrations, reassuring us of God’s presence in the visual signs that surround us.

(Pull out the poinsettia) Look at what I have here! For the last four months, I have had this white poinsettia in my office. All I have done is water it regularly and remove the dead leaves when necessary. It's looking a little ragged, but it's not too bad for being here since Christmas. I wanted to try and keep it going as long as I could after Christmas. Back in January I couldn't have imagined why that might feel so meaningful today.

On Christmas Eve, we always read from the first chapter of John's Gospel: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (1:1-5).

Julie Pratt had the great idea this week for us to place luminaries on our porches this weekend, much like we do at Christmas. Craig Johnson was incredibly generous and made available to all of us pre-made luminaries which we could pick-up at the church this week. And several of you did that and shared pictures with me of your luminaries shining at your homes. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

This year, more than any other year, we need to hear that strong connection between Christmas and Easter. We need that pronouncement of John that God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth (1:14). We need to remember that God's light was not extinguished with the brutality of Good Friday, or the uncertainty of Holy Saturday. We need to hear and believe once again that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Matthew's account of that first Easter is unique to the other three gospel accounts of that morning. In Luke, Mark, and John, when the women arrive at Jesus' tomb, the stone has already been rolled away. But in Matthew, an earthquake occurs as an angel of God "came and rolled back the stone and sat on it" (28:2). Not only do Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph witness this, so too do the guards who had been stationed in the cemetery. Last week, we read that the city of Jerusalem trembled upon Jesus' entry into the holy city. When he died on the cross, Matthew says that "the earth shook, and the rocks were split" (27:51). For the gospel writer, Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection shake the earth to its core.

For the first half of Matthew's account of Easter, it feels like more of the same fear, sorrow, and anxiety of the previous days. The women come, wishing to see the tomb. They are startled by a great earthquake. They see this man in dazzling white descend from the heavens, rolling a huge stone to the side of the tomb. The guards who had been present

“shook and became like dead men” (28:4). All the women witness and experience must have been terribly unsettling, to say the least.

And then, in verse five, there is a divine shift in tone: “But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay’” (28:5-6). A trajectory that has been descending into further darkness is shifted into the light of God’s hope.

That hope is reinforced by the risen Jesus meeting the women as they went to tell his disciples. Just as suddenly as the earthquake rolled the stone away from the tomb, so too does Jesus encounter them: “Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’” (28:9). On the night before he died, Jesus bent down and washed his disciples’ feet in an act of humility and love. Now, the women “came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him” (28:9). And the risen Jesus echoes the angel’s words to the women: “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (28:10).

Martin Copenhaver writes: *When the angel says, “Do not be afraid,” or when Jesus says, “Fear not,” it is not assurance that nothing can go wrong, because often things do go wrong. It is not assurance that everything turns out for the best, because, if we are honest about it, it seldom does. Rather, it is assurance that, whatever may happen to us, whatever a day may hold, God has the power to strengthen us and uphold us; that whatever we must face, we do not face it alone; that nothing we encounter is stronger than God’s love; that ultimately God gets the last word; that in the end – and sometimes even before the end – God’s love is triumphant. Only God can offer such assurance, and that is why, in the end, only God, or one of God’s messengers, can say, “Do not be afraid,” and say it with authority.*

It is not the words that are said that matter. Rather, what matters is the source. Søren Kierkegaard illustrated the difference by observing that when a theological student says, “There is eternal life,” and God’s own Son says, “There is eternal life,” the words may be the same and equally true, but there is a critical difference: only one assurance is said with authority.

The words, “Do not be afraid,” take strong root in the hearts of the characters of this Gospel story, because they accept that these words come from the only one who has the authority to give such assurance. There is only one who can offer such words in the face of life’s uncertainties and before the certainty of death, and do so with authority. Or, in the words of an ancient benediction: “May you fear God so much, that you fear nothing at all” (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, ©2010: 348-350).

This Easter is unlike any other we have experienced in our lives. Family gatherings and traditions have been put on hold. Unlike previous

years, it has been harder for many of us to focus on the events of Holy Week. We miss being together in this physical space as the community of faith.

We are living through a time of great fear and anxiety. We are hesitant to go to the store and stand too close to someone, for fear of them coughing, sneezing, or even breathing on us. We turn on the news, and all we seem to hear is bad news: rising death tolls, 97% of Americans under stay-at-home orders, unprecedented filings for unemployment, health care workers exhausted and sacrificing so much on our behalf. It feels as if the earth is shaking under our feet.

“Do not be afraid.” There is only one who can offer such words in the face of life’s uncertainties and before the certainty of death, and do so with authority.

Don’t believe those words because I am saying them. Don’t believe those words because Lisa is saying them. Don’t believe those words because your friends and family are saying them.

Believe those words because God is saying them. Believe those words because Jesus is saying them. And it is because we know the source of those words – “do not be afraid” – that we will not be left alone.

In the midst of our isolation and quarantine, God is with us and will give us strength. In the midst of our grief and sorrow, God is with us and will give us comfort and peace. In the midst of our restlessness and disappointment, God is with us and will give us calm and reassurance. In the midst of our worry and anxiety, God is with us and will give us hope and joy.

And when we experience God’s very real and indelible presence, then we are moved like the women to go quickly, with fear and great joy, to tell others what we have seen, felt, and experienced (28:8). We are not called to stay in the cemetery, or even to remain at the feet of our risen Lord. We are called to go and tell others what this day is truly about: God’s love conquering all powers, all forces – God’s love conquering all. We don’t have to be all together as one to bear witness to the resurrection. All we have to do is trust in the authority of the one who tells us, “Do not be afraid,” and then share that good news with others.

No, this is not an Easter like any other. But thank God we are able to hear the Easter message of hope and joy in a time such as this: “Do not be afraid. He is not here. He is risen. Go and tell the others.”

Alleluia! Amen.