

Resurrection of our Lord  
April 16, 2017  
Pastor Martha Bardwell  
Matthew 28:1-10

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

So how about this angel, huh? This fabulous angel—did you notice him in the story? The women arrive at the tomb, the earth starts to rumble, and then this angel sky dives down to the ground, rolls back the stone in front of the tomb, and—well, sits on it. It says he was like a flash of lightning. A flash of lightning that so stuns the guards, they appear to be dead men.

I find this angel a rather comical, totally delightful display of God's power over death, of God's power of life and love that is stronger than the Empire and its mechanisms of control.

You see, as the gospel of Matthew tells the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, the tomb is sealed extra tight. There is an attempt by the religious and political elites to make extra-sure that this Jesus isn't taken from the tomb—They Know, They Know, that resurrection is impossible, but they think that Jesus's disciples might try to pull off a resurrection stunt, you know, steal the body away and claim that he rose from the dead as he had said. They know that then, Jesus's movement of love and liberation would just continue to grow and grow until it was out of control—and that the very order and logic of the Empire would be forever threatened.

So after Jesus is buried, they seal off the tomb. They do whatever people do to seal a tomb...tomb sealant? I don't know. And then they place 24/7 surveillance around the tomb. Armed guards, to keep watch. I imagine that if they'd had security cameras back then, they would have used them no doubt. I mean imagine the surveillance they'd put on that tomb today.

So then back to this angel. The women come to the tomb. The earth rumbles. And this angel sky dives down, rolls this sealed stone away with ease I imagine, right in front of these armed guards, and—he sits on it.

What do you imagine his face looked like? As most of you know I have a 2 ½ year old Naomi. And I, well, I imagine her face on the angel face. In particular, the face that she makes when I'm giving her a bath, and she's been playing with her cups and playing with her little fish and her rubber ducky as she does...and then it's time to actually wash. So I get out the washcloths, one for her and one for me, and I put some soap on mine and lather it up, and I start to try to wash her. Every time, Naomi will grab the wash cloth out of my hand, and sit on it. She stuffs her wash cloth under herself, too and crosses her legs tight to hold them down. And she looks up at me with this little impish grin that says it all, that says something like, "Mama, what are you going to do now?" I am disarmed and she knows she's winning.

This angel, I imagine, has that same impish grin as he sits on the tombstone. The guards are disarmed by this and they know that God's winning, that their attempts to contain and control the person and message of Jesus are futile.

And then the angel speaks to the women: "Do not be afraid," he says. This is what the risen Jesus says to the women, too, after he greets them—"Do not be afraid." This must be a message we humans need to hear from God, because you can find it all across the Bible, over and over. Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid. It's a resurrection message for all of us this morning. Too often we get closed off from God and each other by our fear. Only you know what kind of fear it is you live with. Is it fear of death? Is it fear of suffering? Fear of public speaking? Fear of making a fool out of yourself? Fear of not being good enough? Fear of failure? *Invite congregation to name some others...*

Might the fear you live with even be—fear not of death, but of life? Fear to really trust God and LIVE?

There's a popular quote you may have heard, often misattributed to Nelson Mandela. The quote comes from Marianne Williamson, an activist and author. She writes:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." Endquote.

Now when we embrace the call to live, the call from God to live fully in this world, it sure doesn't mean things are going to be easy for us. We are called to follow the way of Jesus which is the way of the cross, to show up and shine our lights and stand in the places where it matters where God's children and creation suffer. And this may well mean that we will experience suffering. But that's OK. Because being joined to Christ's death and resurrection as we are in the waters of baptism means that even though the worst things can and do happen, God is with you, now, in this moment and to the end. It means that God's love and life, God's mercy and liberation is ultimately unstoppable and has the final word in our lives and our world. Living in this truth is what it means to embrace the logic of resurrection, and to let go of fear-based reasoning that can too easily dictate our lives.

I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and pastor who was executed by the Nazis for his resistance to their regime. He was a man who knew that following the risen Christ meant risking one's life for the sake of those who suffer from the blows of Empire. His last recorded words before he went to face his execution reflect a profound trust in a God of resurrection—he wrote: "This is the end—for me, the beginning of life."

I think of a more contemporary example—Kelly Gissendaner. Some of you followed her story when it made national news a couple of years ago. She was executed by the state of Georgia in September of 2015 for orchestrating her husband's murder. While she was on death row, she experienced a conversion to Christianity. She studied Bonhoeffer, and other theologians, and started ministering to the women in prison with her. She helped these women to see their inherent God-given dignity and worth and to trust in the promises of God—and her ministry was life-saving for many of them.

When her time for execution came, she wept, she prayed to God, and she sang *Amazing Grace*: "*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.*"

And what will we see, when the amazing grace and love of God that we witness in the resurrection of Jesus finally enfolds us and meets us at the hour of our death? I am not generally one to speculate about what heaven will look like. I don't think there's much use in that. I've heard people talk about St. Peter greeting folks at the gates. Well, this morning I can't help speculating a little...and Matthew's resurrection story gives me a different picture of what it might be like when we finally meet our maker...

I picture this angel, with that defiant, impish grin, the one sitting on Jesus' tombstone—only I picture him sitting on a big big pile. And in the pile is all the fearful stuff. The tools of execution. The tomb sealant and surveillance cameras. Weapons of mass destruction, oil pipelines, drugs, walls we've built, money, all the things we've used to damage the earth and each other—it's all there. Your fears, my fears. It's all in the pile. And this angel is sitting on it. Grinning a defiant grin that says it all, that says—"Oh you thought this was in control. Oh you thought wrong..."

With alleluia bells and visions of the risen Jesus and this fabulous angel in our heads and hearts, may we be filled with joy and courage to shine our lights even more brightly, and to bring the love and hope of God into all the hurting places of our world.

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