

*God of life, enliven your Word as it is read, sung, preached, and practiced among us. Teach us to embody your living Word with our lives. Amen.*

Some of you have heard me say that I've had my Easter sermon done for months!

Here it is:

Jesus is dead.

April fools!

It's tempting to just leave it there and move on to the next hymn. But the truth is, Easter *wasn't* really an April Fools' joke. It wasn't funny.

When the women discover the empty tomb, they are terrified.

They leave and tell no one what they have discovered.

Salome and the Marys were facing a crisis of faith. Everything that they had dedicated their lives to for the past several years had come crashing down around them the previous Friday.

The man who had shown them their worth as children of God – the one who had turned their world upside down in the best possible way – the teacher who redeemed religion for them – *Jesus...* had been executed.

He had died. They'd watched as he was buried.

And then they had to celebrate Passover, a major holiday honoring freedom. They probably didn't feel like celebrating, not after their beloved leader was taken prisoner, and executed, rather than set free.

These women were grieving. So in order to make some sense of their grief, they decided to go visit Jesus' tomb.

Mary, Mary, and Salome were looking for a way to channel their grief into productive energy.

They made the excuse of anointing Jesus' body for burial. But that wasn't their primary purpose. If it was, they would have planned ahead and brought along a half dozen other disciples, to help them roll away the stone from the tomb.

They didn't really care if they would be able to anoint Jesus' body or not. They just needed something to do with all their grief. And so they went to the tomb. And they hoped to find some way to spend their nervous energy.

And in the entire history of dealing with nervous energy, never has anyone found something so meaningful to do than what the Marys and Salome did with theirs!

When they arrived at the tomb, not only was the stone rolled away, but Jesus' body was nowhere to be found!

And they were terrified.

Which means, they should have known what was coming next.

In the Gospel of Mark, people are terrified a number of times. Six times, to be precise, prior to the Easter story.

Twice, Mark tells us, people are terrified in response to Jesus' miracles. (5:15; 5:36)

They don't know what to make of his supernatural power.

Twice, Mark tells us, people are terrified of Jesus himself. (9:32; 10:32) He developed such a reputation that people weren't willing to challenge his teachings, or even ask him for clarification.

In the sixth chapter of Mark, Jesus sent his disciples across the lake, while he took a break to pray. In the wee hours of the morning, while the disciples were struggling to make progress across the lake, Jesus came near to their boat, walking on the water.

The disciples were terrified.

The only way that Jesus could calm their fears was to climb into their boat and calm the waves and remind them that, as long as he was there, they were going to be ok. (6:45-51)

In the ninth chapter of Mark, Jesus took a select few of his disciples to the top of a mountain. Moses and Elijah showed up too, and Jesus' appearance was changed while the disciples looked on, slack-jawed.

They were terrified.

God spoke to them directly out of a cloud on that mountaintop, and the only way that Jesus could calm the disciples down was to accompany them down the mountain, back to where life was a little more predictable. (9:2-10)

Throughout the Gospel, faithful people are terrified at the miracles and the teachings of Jesus.

They are afraid... *when Jesus is there.*

Mark has set up the scene perfectly.

Here, at the end of the Gospel, the women don't quite know what to do next. And yet they have faith. They come to visit Jesus' tomb, remembering what a difference he has made in their lives.

But his tomb is empty. And a strange, angelic-looking man is there, claiming that Jesus is no longer dead.

The women don't know what to do with this information.

They are afraid.

As the disciples were at the Transfiguration, and when Jesus appeared to them walking on water.

So *we know* what happens next.

The women see Jesus.

Mark doesn't need to write it for us. Because his whole Gospel has been written around the premise that *a time of fear is exactly the time when Jesus shows up*.

When his followers are terrified, Jesus is there.

On the first Easter, the women were afraid and told no one what they had seen.

But then, after Mark's Gospel ends, *we know* that they experienced Jesus! And *we know* that they told the world about it!

Because here we are, halfway around the globe, two millennia later, still telling the same story!

Obviously, the women got over their fear – as Jesus' other disciples had overcome their fear earlier in his ministry. Somehow, Jesus knew exactly how to comfort his followers, and encourage their faith.

Somehow, at some point, the women came to understand the power and the truth of the Resurrection. And they shared their excitement with others! Because we are still here today, sharing that story with the world.

When we are terrified, Jesus shows up.

This is good news for us.

When schoolchildren are afraid for their lives due to the threat of gun violence, Jesus shows up.

When black and brown children have to get “the talk” about what to do if they ever encounter police, Jesus shows up.

When women experience dehumanization, abuse, assault, or other forms of sexism, Jesus shows up.

When refugees flee their homelands in hope of finding a more life-giving future, Jesus shows up.

When displaced people take a stand to fight for their right to return to their homeland – a right recognized by international law, but ignored by the people with tanks and guns – Jesus shows up.

When we are afraid, that is exactly the time when Jesus is preparing a miracle. That is exactly the time when Jesus is ready to be with us.

It won't look like anything we expect.

There's no way that the women could have expected the empty tomb. Even if they had believed Jesus' predictions, that he would die and then rise again, they couldn't have expected that Jesus would simply leave the tomb, and leave them to figure it all out on their own.

When Jesus shows up, it's not what we expect.

But when fear is present, we have a God who *does* show up. Jesus walks with us, knows how to comfort us, and encourage us, and calm our fears.

Here's the thing, folks. Jesus is alive!

Our God became mortal, was put to death, and came back to life!

This is dangerous territory.

It has never happened before.

The only April Fools' joke of the Gospel was God being vulnerable enough to carry our human fears, all the way to death.

That's not something anyone should expect a god to do.

But our God did it. On Good Friday, the joke was on the world, as Jesus was put to death on the cross – foolishness to the world, but to us, eternal life!

Because on the third day, Jesus showed the world that he wasn't kidding.

Death had been overcome. It was not the strongest or most certain thing in the world any more.

It's worth being scared about this.

If God can conquer even death, what other assumptions and prejudices can God conquer?

Jesus defied the power of an occupying empire. He overturned the death penalty. He put to shame an oppressive government.

Jesus gave authority to women and honor to prostitutes. He broke social customs and abolished barriers between people.

Jesus was God.

He was more powerful than we can imagine.

And he let himself be put to death.

And because of that – because Jesus died – he looks to be the fool. What kind of power allows itself to look weak?

This is when it's time to be terrified.

Just when Jesus seems to be defeated, he's going to break all the rules and come back from the dead. He's getting ready to show up precisely where the world is hurting most.

The women were right to be afraid.

But they were also right to go out, and tell the world about the powerful, boundary-breaking, Gospel truth of Jesus' resurrection!

Because when Jesus came back from the dead, his followers weren't the only ones who needed to fear.

Powers of oppression were about to see their end.

Because of Easter, injustice and inequality can survive no more! God has come back from the dead to challenge it all.

The Resurrection is terrifying.

And for those of us who know what it's like to feel oppressed or depressed or somehow downtrodden – it is also the best news in the universe.

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.