

Easter Vigil April 19, 2014  
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Don't be afraid: the Lord has risen. Alleluia! Alleluia, the Lord has risen.  
Don't be afraid. The dead have come back to life: don't be afraid!  
Tonight, we have gathered here to hear a great story. On the one hand, we are all being appropriately joyful and solemn as this is a church service, and we have our church service moods and behavior on. But let's get real: if we break this down by archetype, this really could sound just like another sort of story you have heard before. You've gone to camp, of course? At camp, as the shadows fall, as the stars come out, as the nighttime clouds obscure the moon, invariably, the counselor or your father or your friend takes the flashlight. And you know exactly how the ghost story ends: with screams and fear and probably ghosts or werewolves. We're human beings, and that is simply how stories of the Great Beyond end, right? Here, we are telling you the ultimate story of the Great Beyond: a sealed tomb, the darkest part of the night just before the dawn, a bright apparition, a missing body. Of course, you don't need to be sitting around a campfire listening to ghost stories to be terrified. We're human beings. We are very capable of wreaking terror upon each other. We live in the Greater Washington DC area. I joke to my parents that in the event of catastrophic events, I am just going to pour myself a beverage and put my feet up, knowing that utter chaos will take over everything near the Beltway.

Fear and terror are just a normal part of being human. Our perception is limited. We're all alone on this little spinning ball called Earth, which we have poisoned, and it's spinning through an endless dark heavens. Things beyond our perception and experience terrify us. Angels are very clearly not human—throughout scripture, they begin by rearguing the people they visit. "Don't be afraid!" I guess they are so unusual in appearance that we need that reassurance. And something has definitely happened in that tomb- whether it was grave robbing or a dead body returning to life... We expect death and the Great Beyond to be frightening. If we don't find the resurrection story both fearful and tingling with excitement, we just aren't paying attention.

Imagine it: a small group of soldiers trading watches as guards at Jesus' tomb, to be sure that the prophet's fanatics didn't try to steal his body. I imagine they didn't spook easily, although in the pre-dawn darkness, there's plenty to be spooky about. Listen: There's wind in the trees. Hear the early bird calls. But above all else—don't you hear that deep pre-dawn silence? Everyone and everything is sleeping... except for the guard. There's nowhere comfortable to sit down—just the cold rock of a tomb to lean on. And what do you think it was like at the moment Jesus was resurrected? Dorothy Sayers, in *A Man Born to Be King*, draws a vivid picture: imagine the guards standing before the Sanhedrim, explaining how the tomb was emptied despite their guard:

"The setting moon was over against us, and we had also a torch... There came another tremor, and another, still more violent. I put my hand to the door to steady myself, and my arm tingled to the shoulder as happens sometimes when you touch iron in a thunder storm... we were flung apart with a great shock, so that we fell to the ground. And the flame of the torch streamed out flat, as though a wind had gone over it from the sepulcher... Joel can tell you the thing that happened next..."

Joel continues, "I heard a pebble spin from the path, as if a foot had struck it; and something passed between me and the brazier, blotting out the light of the fire... it went

very swiftly, but the shadow that followed it was the shadow of a man.” An elder mocks him, “This is a fine soldier—to be frightened of a shadow.”

And Elihu explains the arrival of the angel: “we... examined the stone and the seals, but found everything secure. And while we looked and wondered- somebody laughed behind us! ... He was tall and fair... his skin and his garments were whiter than the moonlight, and his face beardless, very fresh and smiling. In all my life I never saw anything so terrible as that smiling face... we were as dead men for fear of it....”

The apparition does not speak. Elihu says, “It went forward and stood before the sepulcher. The moon was behind it, yet it cast no shadow on the face of the rock. Then, as though the great stone had weighed no more than a bubble, it rolled it back with one hand and sat up on it, smiling still. And the moonlight and the torchlight shone through the open door. And the tomb was empty...” (p 324, 325, *The Man Born to Be King*).

This is just not within the realm of experiences our brains are prepared to accept. Our perception cannot make sense of this. The tomb is a place where we place the dead, and we don't disturb them after that. We only visit from a safe distance.

And here on the tomb itself, a laughing angel sits and says, “Do not be afraid!” It doesn't seem to bother the angel that he's terrified the guards. He sits directly upon the tomb's stone entrance—right on the doorway between life and death. Who laughs at the doorway of death? Only those who know what lies beyond. Do not be afraid: something very, very different and new has happened here.

Mary and one of the other Mary's, we aren't sure which, came towards the tomb as morning was dawning. I do not find it astounding that they were awake that early. Haven't you ever felt a grief that felt just like fear? Of course, C.S. Lewis described it in the book he wrote after the death of his wife Joy, but it's so true. Sometimes, grief wakes us up with an emotion that feels so like fear. It's that strange feeling that shakes you awake from your sleep, and as you lie in the early morning darkness, you realize you are truly awake. “Oh, yes, he really is dead. There will never be another moment when he will be not-dead. This is it. It wasn't a dream.” Mary and Mary were grieving. Maybe they had sat up all night or tossed and turned, but I am sure that as the moon set, they felt a grief so sharp it felt like fear. So they went to the tomb, most likely to finish the work of anointing. I don't think they felt much fear, being as deep in grief as they must have been. So there's a rushing wind and early morning birds and yet another earthquake... what does that matter when your friend lies dead? Who cares?

And yet the Angel on the doorway offers a message which we have heard echoing through Scripture- Do Not Be Afraid. You've heard it before, too—almost every visit of an angel begins with “do not be afraid” (saying to me that the angel's appearance is, at the least, startling). Moses says it to Egyptians as they stand trapped at the Red Sea. An Angel said it to Mary, Jesus' mother, when she learned she was to bear God incarnate. And now, from the very doorway of the tomb, we hear again: “Do not be afraid”. The old words must have echoed in her ears. “This is my message for you. He's not here. He has been raised. Go, and tell his disciples.”

Do not be afraid- something very new has happened. As they run to tell the others, Jesus greets them. “Do not be afraid.” Something new has happened. Do not be afraid: there is no reason to fear. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, God works to rearrange the order of expected things. Life does not end in endless death. Betrayal does not end in revenge. Abandonment does not end in permanent estrangement. Jesus returns to life, and the tomb is found empty. He becomes new-so new, they almost don’t recognize him. Jesus calls his disciples his brothers, and calls them to new work in a new life. Do not be afraid—you will not need your fear on this journey.

The Resurrection turns the expected order of things end over end. In the sorrowful garden, now laughter and joy. Where there was a sealed tomb, now there’s an open, empty cave. Where Mary sorrowed for her lost friend, now reunion. Where there was a bloody tortured death, now there is a healed life. Do not be afraid. The world has shifted. Something new has happened.

There is a great miracle in those words “Do Not Be Afraid”. God whispers to us a part of his great plan to rearrange the expected order of things: humanity expected life to proceed to endless death and lifeless, cold bodies. Humanity expected pre-dawn tombs to lead to fear. And with “do not be afraid”, God’s grace rearranges that expected order of things: Life supersedes death to become ultimate life, risen and living forever. The cold, filled tomb scented with herbs and funeral oils becomes a place of laughter. The quiet walk in dim morning light becomes a full run back to the disciples in bright dawn. Deepest grief is replaced by an almost impossible hope, transforming sorrow into bittersweet joy.

Jesus has risen. Death has no more dominion over us. Nothing will ever be the same again, will it? In the miracle of a resurrected Christ, our grief and sadness is transformed. Do not be afraid. An impossible tragedy is transformed, dawning again on a glorious hope. Alleluia—the Lord has risen! Nothing will ever be the same again. Do not be afraid: Alleluia, alleluia.