

“The Rebirth of Hope”

Mark 16:1-8

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Easter

Today is Easter and you know what that means. It is time for family, food, faith and fear. I'm sure you were with me until I got to that final word.

We agree that Easter is a time for families to gather around a table laden with ham, deviled eggs and potato salad. We're also aware of how important the resurrection is to our faith. According to Paul's letter that was read earlier, I Corinthians 15:1-19, the resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith.

What about fear, though? It seems so out of place on an Easter list. If I asked you what comes to mind when I say the word, Easter, I am confident that no one would respond with fear. Why would I include it? I think Mark would. As a matter of fact, it might be the first word to come to his mind.

What is the dominant emotion in Mark's account of the resurrection? It is fear. The women approached Jesus' burial place with fear, entered the tomb with great apprehension and fled the tomb in terror after seeing an angel, telling no one what they had experienced. Fear permeates Mark's account of the resurrection, unlike the other gospel narratives.

According to Dr. Alan Culpepper, we should not be surprised by this. It was a pattern that runs throughout the entire gospel. “Mark,” writes Culpepper, “is a movement from fear to faith.”

We see this most clearly when the disciples were in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. You recall that Jesus was asleep in the hull of the boat. After the disciples awakened him, Jesus quieted the storm and then asked the disciples two questions. “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” Mark 4:40.

On another occasion, when the disciples were in a storm in the middle of the lake, Jesus came to their aid. When he approached them, he said, “Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid” Mark 6: 50.

We see the connection between fear and faith again when Jairus' daughter was healed. Jairus was a leader in the synagogue and his daughter was gravely ill. Like a loving and worried parent, he approached Jesus and begged for mercy on her behalf. On their way to Jairus' home, some men came to Jairus and told him that his daughter had just died, implying that Jesus no longer needed to come. Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, “Don't be afraid; just believe” Mark 5:36. Jesus continued his journey with Jairus and restored his daughter's health.

Based upon these examples, it is no surprise that Mark combined fear and faith at the empty tomb. It was a theme that he returned to whenever it was appropriate.

Why do you think Mark connected fear and faith so often in his book, including the resurrection? His readers must have been gripped with fear, and rightly so. Depending upon the exact time that Mark wrote, his audience was either facing persecution at the hands of Nero or living in a time of war when Jerusalem was completely destroyed. Who would not be afraid?

So what did Mark do? He reminded his readers that they were not the first believers to be afraid. The followers of Jesus, and even Jesus himself, were all too familiar with it. However, Mark was convinced that fear would not have the final word in their lives, just as it did not in the lives of the early disciples. That empty tomb and new beginning in Galilee helped to restore the disciples' faith and enabled them to overcome their fears. Mark used their example to inspire and encourage his readers during their fearful days.

How does the testimony of that empty tomb speak to you today? Does it help you in dealing with your fears? Does it inspire and encourage you?

One reason that I selected Mark's account of the resurrection is because I believe his situation closely resembles ours. I'm not implying that we are facing persecution and annihilation as his readers did, but our security and well-being are being threatened. We are living in perilous and scary times, too, due to the economy, wars and terrorist threats. Jobs and money may be in short supply, but not fear.

Who do you know that has lost hope and is living in despair? Who among your friends or in your family is struggling with fear? Perhaps I should ask it another way. Who do you know that is not worried and afraid? In many ways, the dominant emotion of our time is fear like it was in Mark's.

What is fear doing to those you love? Is it robbing them of sleep, peace of mind and joy? Is it taking a toll on their relationships or health? Is it bringing out the worst in them?

What can you do to help them? *Begin by sharing your story, including your own struggles.* Be transparent. Let them know what keeps you up at night. Talk about the dreams you have buried.

Follow Mark's example and share your faith. Tell them what the empty tomb means to you. Talk about your faith in a loving God who walks every step of your journey with you providing the strength, courage, wisdom and confidence you need to endure and overcome life's hardships. Be specific and tell them about a time in your life when God took the worst circumstance in your life and made good come from it. Tell them about the re-birth of your faith.

In my Sunday school class this morning, I told the young adults that I teach that the empty tomb inspires me to keep on keeping on when life is tough. If Jesus, with God's help, could overcome the worst that man could throw at him, including persecution, then so can I. That empty tomb symbolizes victory, not just after death, but every day until then.

One of the best ways we can help people who are worried and afraid is to be good role models. Let them see you choose faith over fear by living one day at a time in humility and gratitude. "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances," Paul wrote in Philippians 4:11. How could he do this? "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," Paul wrote two verses later.

What a role model Paul is for all of us. Who needs you to be their role model in these difficult times?

It is also important that you bring those who are struggling with fear into this faith community. Introduce them to fellow pilgrims who are on this common journey that will welcome and embrace them. Let them know that Smoke Rise can be a safe haven for them, too.

You may not be ready to do these things because you are the one who is caught in the grip of fear. You are restless and worried. You can't sleep and your health and relationships are suffering.

Will you let that empty tomb speak to you this morning? Will you choose faith over fear? Will you let us embrace you and accompany you on your journey? If you will, I believe the song penned by Bill and Gloria Gaither that we sang earlier will take on new meaning for you.

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.
Because He lives, **all fear is gone.**
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living, just because He lives.*

