



“Don’t Be Afraid!”
April 9, 2023 | Easter Sunday
Charlie Berthoud | Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for 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. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

-Matthew 28:1-10

If you had been at the crucifixion or at the tomb early that morning, would you have been afraid?

Matthew’s resurrection account is filled with fear.

We hear that the women went to see the tomb. Then there was an earthquake and an angel appeared, rolling back the stone. Something strange was going on.

The women were afraid. Even the mighty Roman guards were afraid, and they ironically “became like dead men” according to the text.

Then the angel told the women “Don’t be afraid.”

Then they encounter Jesus, the resurrected one, who also said “Don’t be afraid.” Their fear is understandable.

Jesus was dead. He was killed by the political and religious leaders who saw him as a threat to their power. Crucifixion was a brutal and very visible way to die, and the Roman Empire used it to terrorize the population into fearful submission. When Jesus began speaking about God’s kingdom—as opposed to Herod’s kingdom—he became a threat.

So the first followers of Jesus were understandably afraid. Their leader was gone and the Empire was flexing its muscle. And with the unusual events at the tomb, it’s even more understandable that the women were afraid.

“Don’t be afraid” says the angel, and “Don’t be afraid” says Jesus.

The message “Don’t be afraid” runs through scripture, which seems odd, given the realities of human existence that we see in the Bible: death and destruction, hunger and injustice, pain and suffering.

But the biblical message is not “there is nothing to be afraid of.” Instead the message is “do not be afraid” which invites a choice, an invitation to live with courage and hope.

So how do we live with courage and hope in challenging times? When the Bible says “Don’t be afraid” very often it’s accompanied by a promise, a promise of God’s presence.

In **Joshua 1:9**, we read God’s words to Joshua, the young military leader:

Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

I knew a woman years ago, who said her husband was a WWII veteran who had a necklace with this verse written on it, and he said it to himself every day.

In **Psalm 23**, the good shepherd psalm, we read:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

In **Isaiah 43**, we hear God's words to the people in exile:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

These words are the inspiration for the wonderful hymn "How Firm a Foundation."

And then in Matthew 28, just a few verses past our reading today, and after sending the women to the other disciples so that they weren't alone, the gospel concludes with the words of the resurrected Jesus:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

God is with us.

What does that mean and how does that happen?

I think God shows up in the people around us.

- The people who sit with us in the hospital waiting room
- The people who bring us food after a loved one dies
- The people who respond to texts and calls late at night

- The people who take time to sit and listen, and weep when we weep, and laugh when we laugh
- The people who go with us to protest rallies and help us fight injustice
- The people who invite us to church.

We need each other because fear is so powerful. Fear is all around us.

Just look at the news—print, TV, online. It's filled with bad news. We like to complain about how "they" only show us the bad stuff. But it's not "their" fault.

We are the ones who buy the papers with the negative headlines about war and political chaos,

We are the ones who watch the shows about greed and lust.

And we are the ones who click on the links about corruption and violence.

Online news agencies report that they present "good news"—the happy and upbeat and heartwarming stories, but they don't get nearly as many clicks as the bad news.

It's almost like we want to be afraid, or we like assuming the worst about people and the world around us.

You know how side-view mirrors say "objects may be closer than they seem"? That's true for cars, but it's as if we've taken that attitude about everything in life, so we get afraid regularly.

Yes there are plenty of bad things in the world and we have to be smart and careful. Fear of genuine danger can keep us safe. But we have let our fears become exaggerated so much that too often, they rule us.

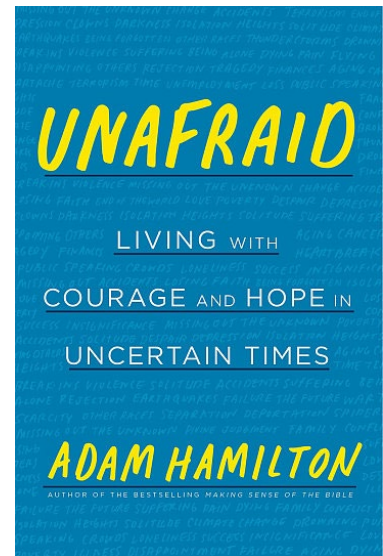
Adam Hamilton wrote a wonderful book *UNAFRAID: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*. The book came out just before Covid and served as a lifeline for many people during the most challenging times of the pandemic.

He writes:

“Real fear...is a gift that has the power to save our lives. Unfortunately, much of our fear is manufactured; our worries are about things that are likely never going to happen or things completely outside of our control. This fear, anxiety, or worry is not a gift; it brings harm instead.” (P. 16)

And he goes on to say: “We can unlearn fear, and in unlearning fear, we can find freedom.” (P. 18)

So a good question for us today is: How do we *unlearn* fear?



In the spirit of the Easter, as we consider what resurrection looks like in our world, our church and our lives, I want to suggest three ways for us to ponder the words of Jesus: “Do not be afraid.” One way to ponder this:

Do not be afraid of **DEATH**

Jesus was dead and then he was alive. His resurrection, even if you just see it as symbolic, proclaims that death is not the last word, that somehow, someday God’s love continues past our physical bodies.

Many of you were here through Lent for our series called “We Belong to God.” Over the past month and a half, we focused on life and death issues, reminding each other of the reality that one day we all will die, and reaffirming the biblical message: In life and in death we belong to God.

In that series we encouraged honest and open reflection on the reality of death. Early in the series, Rev. Clara Thompson preached a wonderful sermon, in which she concluded:

I don’t have a clue what happens after we die. I don’t know if we “see” loved ones or not. I don’t know how old we are in heaven. I don’t know if it’s a black and white “world” in heaven or a technicolor world.

But what I do believe, with all my heart, from the bottom of my toes to the top

of my head and well beyond, is that the same God who loves me and takes care of me now, will love me and take care of me after I die. I believe to my very core that “in life and in death, we belong to God,” and that nothing, absolutely nothing can take that away from us.

We live our lives as best as we can, and when our bodies no longer work, we trust in God’s abundant love and the promise of eternal peace.

The second fear I invite you to ponder is change. Don’t be afraid of **CHANGE**

There are probably some people who are more afraid of change than they are afraid of death—but change is a central part of our calling as Christians.

Jesus began his ministry proclaiming the new reality of God’s kingdom, God’s realm, and he invited people to repent and follow him. Repent means to change direction or to change one’s mind.

As part of the Reformed branch of the Christian tree, we affirm that we are a “church reformed, always reforming, according to the word of God.” This means individually and collectively, we are called to keep learning, to keep changing, to keep growing.

One big way we have changed is in how we understand each other. A lot of past bias and exclusion was built on fear of “others.”

There was a time, when the vast majority of faithful white Presbyterians assumed slavery was OK, because “it’s in the Bible.”

And there was a time when a vast majority of Presbyterians believed that women shouldn’t vote.

And there was a time when people believed gay and lesbian people were “choosing a lifestyle.” We’ve learned a lot over the years. We’ve changed our minds.

And right now in our culture, a lot of us, myself included, are learning and changing our minds about the assumptions we’ve had and fear we’ve had about transgender and non-binary people—people who actually are beloved children of God, just like anyone else.

So to help flex your change muscles this week, maybe you consider:

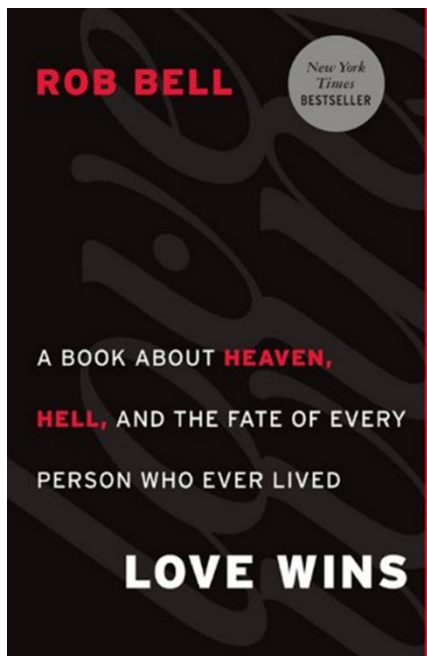
- Changing your eating routine. Try some new food, or try a new restaurant, maybe in a different part of town
- Changing your sources. Try a different kind of book or movie or tv show
- Or most challenging of all, try changing where you sit in church next time you're here. Haha

Seriously, I encourage you to try changing some relatively small things, which will help you not be afraid of bigger changes when they come.

So don't be afraid of DEATH. Don't be afraid of CHANGE. And finally:

Don't be afraid of **GOD**

Sadly, many people are really afraid of God and the idea of hell. In his wonderful 2011 book *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, Rob Bell writes:



"A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment."

He continues:

"This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear."

Over and over again, we hear the message in Scripture that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But the mindset of fearing God runs deep. It's almost like we want to be afraid of God.

Jordan Hawkins is a member of the University of Connecticut men's basketball team—the team that just won the national championship. Among his many tattoos, on his left arm he has a cross and in large letters the words FEAR GOD.



I'd love to ask him what that means to him. From what I've read and come to understand, the biblical mandate "fear God" means to honor God, to hold God in awe, to have a sense of holy otherness—not to be terrified of being punished.

A healthy fear of God is like a healthy parent-child relationship, where the child respects and honors the parent and listens to the parent. Remember: God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

At the end of the service, we're singing a wonderful Easter hymn, "Christ is Risen, Shout Hosanna!"

In the final verse, we acknowledge the pain in the world as we sing:

Tell its grim, demonic chorus:
"Christ is risen! Get you gone!"
God the First and Last is with us.
Sing Hosanna everyone!

Just because it's Easter, it doesn't mean life suddenly gets easy. There is plenty in life that can make us afraid. But together, with resurrection power, remembering that God is with us always, we can live with courage, and hope, and love.

Happy Easter! Christ is risen! Amen.