

Easter - From Fear to Joy

Dr. Tom Pace

April 12, 2020

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; 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 to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Matthew 28:1-10 (NRSV)*

Join with me in prayer. *Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear and open our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

When I was about 13 years old, I was in the garage of our house in southern Illinois in the northern foothills of the Ozark Mountains. I was practicing with a group of friends we called "a band." The band was called "Circuit" and I have no idea why. Here is my photo for our promotion picture. Wasn't I precious!

We were practicing and suddenly it sounded like someone was banging on the garage door. Stuff started falling off the shelves. I ran outside and there was no one outside, but everything else was shaking. We were having an earthquake! I must confess that it was both confusing and terrifying. It was like I couldn't believe it. I just sort of ran around in a circle in fear. Literally the ground I was standing on was shaking underneath me.

My oldest daughter lives in Los Angeles and she does her best to deal with her fear of earthquakes. Earthquakes are scary things.

Our story today begins with an earthquake. In my message today I want you to focus on a verse in this passage that really spoke to me. It says, "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples."

What a weird mixture of emotions! Fear and great joy. But I'm getting ahead of myself. You see, every great sermon, every great story has movement and this vignette, this key moment in history, these brief ten verses have movement, too. And it's my contention that as we look at this, we can see how the same movement can happen in our lives.

The first movement I see in this passage is from resignation to fear. It starts with resignation. Sort of tacit and sad acceptance of the death of Jesus. We see it here where it says, "After the Sabbath as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb." They had probably come to prepare the body for burial, that's what Mark and Luke say. There's this kind of "nonchalantness."

Sometimes we go through life with sort of a "ho-hum" attitude. This flatness. For these women it's sort of a day in and day out way of existing as they just go through the day. They're thinking "we do what we have to do." Have you ever been there?

The women arrive dutifully at the tomb to make sure the body has had a proper burial. Then in an instant everything starts to shake. An angel descends and the stone is rolled back. Gosh, it must have been such a shock! A whipsaw. Perhaps we can find in this part of the passage a metaphor for life sometimes. In a moment of calm when everything seems predictable then everything changes. And the ground on which you have been standing starts to shake. A job goes away. A spouse wants divorce. A diagnosis is bad. Your business disappears. Then what happens is your body starts pumping adrenalin and this fear rises inside you and the fight or flight mechanism kicks in.

Let's talk about fear for a moment. Fear is an important emotion.

When I was in graduate school, I was doing my work in New Jersey and our kids came to see us in New York City. We were walking around; I don't really remember where we were going but I said, "I know the way." So off we went and as we went farther and farther it seemed weird. I felt like I wasn't going the right way. Then we ended up in this dark alley and something inside

me said, "I don't know. But we're going to keep walking." Then a police officer shows up and says, "Folks, you shouldn't be walking around over here with these small kids, it's just not safe."

It's not smart to ignore your fears.

The angel of the Lord appears to these women on that day and says, "Don't be afraid." But that didn't fix it. It says, "They ran with fear." Then Jesus shows up and says the same message, "Do not be afraid."

Friends, this is a crucial point. It's not that we shouldn't have fear. Of course, we're going to have fear. We're human beings. But what are we going to do with that fear? Look, God gave us hunger to lead us to eat, God gave us thirst to lead us to drink, and God gave us fear to turn us back to him. What are you going to do with your fears?

Reinhold Niebuhr who was one of the great theologians of the last century tells a story about how he was going on a walk with his father. There was a great thunderstorm and his father said, "Get under my coat!" And he put his overcoat on him. And he said that it was dark under there and scary, but he realized that he just needed to keep walking and trust his father to get him home. I love that picture. Trust the father to get you home.

One of the neat things about this time in the life of the church is that I get all sorts of emails from people I wouldn't have connected with before. I got this one from a woman in our church and let me read it to you. She said, "Dear Tom, I'm not sure if this message will find its way to you since you probably get so many...but I'm a Christian but have not attended church in years. I found myself turning to God during these times and your message found its way to me. My husband and I have found our way back to God and realized that this horrible virus has some positive things happening. Hopefully, more people are finding their way back to God. Just wanted to drop you a line and say thank you." And she signed her name.

You see, fear shakes up our lives and can lead us to change. It can turn us back to the God we've taken for granted and make us reach out to grasp the hand of the God who's been there for us all along. To make us keep walking, to keep trusting that God will get us home.

We can't get stuck in our fear. We cannot let fear define our identity.

You know what dad jokes are? It's hard to define them exactly but maybe you can just say they're bad jokes. I heard one story at a memorial service recently that must be from the dad joke handbook because I used to do it, too.

At her father's funeral, his daughter Barbara said, "When I was a kid I'd say to my dad, 'I'm hungry.' And my dad would say, 'Nice to meet you, hungry! I'm Dad!'" Of course, nothing is more human than fear, but he's saying, "don't be afraid. Don't let that fear become your identity. Instead, let it drive you into the arms of God. Let it lead you to reach out and take the hand of Christ.

Now it is interesting that if the first movement is from resignation to fear, the second movement is not from fear to peace or serenity, but from fear to joy. "They went with fear and great joy."

Listen, Easter is a day of joy, unbridled, unflinching unapologetic joy. My goodness, the disciples had just watched their leader be crucified. Of course, they had fear! But they ran with joy.

We can make that same move - from fear to joy.

Now there were two reasons I think that the women were so filled with joy. First, because they knew now that they had Jesus with them forever and ever.

When I was a freshman in college my beautiful wife, Dee, was a senior in high school. She was in Illinois and I was at SMU, so the most amazing moments were the moments when we could be together. She'd come visit me or I'd go visit her and those were incredible moments of joy when we were together.

Have you seen that video of the man who's been in rehab and he reunites with his wife for his 84th birthday? It's so powerful. They see each other and they hug and hug. That was joy.

What if you realize that you could be with the one you loved the very most? The Jesus whose love was so great that he died for you? That you could be with him forever, no matter what. That's a joy that transcends happiness.

Look, the Christian faith isn't about religion, it's about a relationship. That's what faith is. It's that relationship that we have with Jesus that brings us great joy.

Now I'm not talking about happiness. Happiness is something different. It's important, too, of course. You've probably heard that the most popular course at Yale University is Psych 157. It's called "Professor Laurie Santos' Happiness Course." I learned a few weeks ago that it was being offered online on Coursera, an online learning platform and it was free. So, I signed up and I'm taking it and I've learned some things. I've learned I have to change my expectations. I've learned

that happiness comes from behaving differently. That we have to think and behave differently if we want to be happier.

But here's the thing in this Easter moment. It's not about happiness, it's about joy. Joy is rooted in relationship.

There's an old African American spiritual, "In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus. You can have the whole world, just give me Jesus. And when I am alone, give me Jesus. And when I come to die, give me Jesus."

The second reason they had such joy was because in that instance it was clear that what Jesus had taught them about life and death was true. That this life is not the end of the story and they, too, could believe that this physical life was not all there is. His very presence in that moment proved that. He demonstrated the truth of what he had taught them in the Gospel of John when he said, "I will come again and take you to myself. That where I am you will be with me."

Did you ever ask yourself this question when you're anxious? What is the worst thing that could happen? And you trace it all the way to the end and you say, "Well, the worst thing is that I could die." Or for a lot of us, for me, it's not that I might die, but someone I love very much could die. Our own death is not the worst thing. The prospect of the death of someone we love is horrifying, overwhelming. What if?

What if that isn't the worst thing of all? What if we really believe that in this moment God overcame death itself! And that we will see them again in a place of amazing beauty.

Earlier this year I recommended to you a book by Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. It's called *The Book of Joy*. And in there the Dalai Lama talks about what led him to joy. Let me read to you what he says, "I will meet my loved ones, my parents, and my older brother, whom I didn't know because he died in infancy. I will meet many wonderful stalwarts. I want to meet St. Augustine. I want to meet St. Thomas Aquinas and the people who have taught us so much about praying. Because God is God, because God is infinite, because none of us who are creatures will ever fathom the infinitude that is God, heaven is going to be forever a place of new discovery. I will say, 'Oh, God, you are so beautiful.' And I will call out, I will call, 'Come, come and see,' and other ones will say, 'Have you seen just how beautiful God is?'"

That's the great and incredible thing of knowing the incredible goodness and beauty of God.

So, the first movement is from resignation to fear, the second is from fear to joy and the last one is from joy to sharing with others. You see it over and over in this passage. In verse seven:

"Then go quickly and tell his disciples." Then again in verse eight, "They ran to tell his disciples." Then in verse ten again, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers."

Go and tell. If we want to really magnify our joy to make our joy even more complete, then we share it with others.

Last time we were in Israel we were driving on the bus when the bus pulled over onto the side of the road at a place I'd never been before. We were north of Jericho in the Western Bank. Mr. Pinto, our guide, got out and led us over a hill, a brief hill. There were crosses on the hill and we went over and looked into this deep canyon. It's an amazing place. You could see on the far wall of the canyon a monastery that's still active. It was built in the fifth century and the wadi that runs thorough there is the wadi many believe is the "Valley of the shadow of Death." And as he shared that with us it was as if he had this secret he wanted to share, and you could see his face beaming. He was so excited for us to see this thing. When we choose to share that which makes us most joyful, which just comes up inside us, and gives us a joy that transcends our circumstance in any way - when we choose to share that with others, our own joy is magnified.

The three movements, from resignation to fear, from fear to joy, and from joy to sharing with others.

It strikes me that this time in the world, in our lives, in our church, that we can learn something from this. That this movement can happen for us, too. And we can move - from resignation to "ho-hum, let's just go through the motions..." - to fear. That's what the world has done to us. And then we can move from that fear to great joy, knowing that no matter what happens we have the presence of Christ in our lives right now. And we have the hope for life everlasting, and eternal with those whom we love. And we will want to share that with others.

Let's pray together. *O Gracious and loving God, sometimes we are resigned to just going through the motions. And in the midst of that life jolts us. We find ourselves standing on shaky ground and fear takes us over. And in those moments, God, let us hear the Easter message that these women heard from you. Move us from fear to joy and then let us share that joy with others. Amen.*