

Holding on for Dear Life

Matthew 28.1-10 (The Message)

Easter Sunday

April 24, 2011

“This may be why the gospel accounts of the resurrection tell us not to be afraid – because new life is frightening. It is unnatural. To expect a sealed tomb and find one filled with angels, to hunt the past and discover the future, to seek a corpse and find the risen Lord – none of this is natural.”

- Barbara Brown Taylor (adapted)

After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God's angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn't move. The angel spoke to the women: "There is nothing to fear here. I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed. "Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, 'He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' That's the message." The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. "Good morning!" he said. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Jesus said, "You're holding on to me for dear life! Don't be frightened like that. Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I'll meet them there."

I have one response to the angel's proclamation that there is nothing to fear. Easy for him to say; easy enough for an angel accustomed to divine razzle-dazzle and all. It may be mundane in heaven - an earthquake reeling and rocking the very ground we stand on - but around here it freezes the blood of battle seasoned warriors, and drains the courage of the disciples who sought Jesus' grave early on that third day. There is nothing to fear here. Yeah, right! It could be that blazing shafts of lightning is common in heaven, but around here it creates panic. You would think that by this time all fear was behind the disciples. They had come through this nightmare unscathed; or so it would seem. They had recoiled from Roman

*James R. "Bo" Crowe
Overland Park Christian Church*

soldiers eyeing them closely for signs of sedition or rebellion. They had been haunted by Sadducees and Pharisees looking for signs of heresy, seeking to discredit or arrest Jesus and anyone associated with him. It would appear they had come through all this unscathed, and all fear was behind them. But on the dawn of the third day, according to gospel accounts, there was plenty of fear to go around.

The Roman guards ...stricken with fear. The disciples ... stricken with fear at the sight of the angel. Even when they encounter the risen Lord, he notes from their actions that they are frightened out of their wits. "You're holding on to me for dear life!" he said. There is plenty of fear to go around even after the resurrection. But I can't help but wonder if the fear the disciples experienced at Easter was different from the ordinary fear we know day in and day out. You know what I mean; mundane fear that comes from insecurity, from failure to meet the needs of the day, or from apprehension about the future. The resurrection fear of the disciples seems born of awe and wonder, a fear born of recognizing that the world as we know it is no more, and that they stand looking on a new and mysterious future.

Mary didn't go to the tomb seeking the resurrected Lord; she went to confirm Jesus' death and find some sense of closure. Perhaps she hoped that by doing so she could hold on to the past, and regain something of what they had in Galilee. In one of the appearance stories in John, for example, Mary meets Jesus and calls him teacher. This is what he had been in Galilee, her teacher; a man with whom she had found comfort and challenge; at any rate a man to whom she could relate. But it is the resurrected Lord who now stands before her, and teacher will no longer do. Barbara Brown Taylor has noted that teacher may have been an adequate Friday name, but it is not a Sunday name for the risen Lord.

And this sight – the risen Lord released from all bonds and made new in all ways – brought with it fear. New life is frightening; because it threatens everything we know and long to hold on to for dear life. So we, like Mary, approach Easter in fear. We too want to hold on to Jesus as we knew him as a child. We want the comfort of someone who will embrace us in love and protect us from that big ol' bad world out there. But the resurrected Lord sends us into that world armed only with love.

Nevertheless, the angel assures us there is nothing to fear here. We can go into a world made new, however awkward that might feel at first. We can look on a mysterious new future without fear. How I wish we could be convinced of this; that we can leave fear behind and embrace in faith a world made new in all ways.

I rose quite early this morning joyful at the prospect of Easter Sunday morning; but my mood was crushed before my second cup of coffee by a Facebook posting. A high school acquaintance used the occasion of Easter morning to denounce – no, to curse – Muslims who, in his estimation, are beneath contempt and deserving of nothing if not utter annihilation. Oh how I wanted to point him to the angel’s message, “There is nothing to fear here.”

Easter is not a day for denunciation born of fear, it’s not a day to condemn Muslims, gays, liberals, conservatives ...have I forgotten anyone who should be on this list? Easter is not a day for bashing and denunciation born of fear. Easter offers us a glimpse of the time when God will be all things for all people, when no one will be rejected. I want to repeat the angel’s message to this man; there is nothing to fear here. And I want to repeat this message to friends who have lost a loved one. They’re not quite sure how they’re going to move on from this point, but I want to assure them that there is nothing to fear here. Their loss is real, their pain is deep, but there is nothing to fear because God has planted a seed within us that will never die.

Easter faith offers us a glimpse of the time when love will be all things to all people; a time when there will be no darkness, only light. I want to repeat this message to friends who are struggling with illness or disease, or who find themselves estranged, lost, and alone, walking through darkness; there is nothing to fear here. Their troubles are real; of course, the cancer is real, but there is nothing to fear, for on this day we are offered a taste of the abundance God offers us. Today we sense that seed growing within us; a seed that will never die but will blossom forth to fullness of life.

So on this glorious Easter Sunday, at this time of joyful celebration, let me remind you that there is nothing to fear here. We don’t have to hold on for dear life to past fears; we don’t have to hide from the world, and we don’t have to live in fear looking for scapegoats to ridicule or condemn. We don’t have to live in fear of the slings and arrows life throws our way, because

the one we seek, Jesus of Nazareth, is not lying cold in a tomb. He has risen, and there is nothing to fear here.