

DO NOT BE AFRAID

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

On March 4, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated to his first of four terms as President of the United States. In the midst of the Great Depression, the new president began his inaugural address with these words, which include one of the most famous phrases in American history:

“This is a day of national consecration. And I am certain that on this day my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our people impels. This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper.

“So, first of all, ***let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself***-- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and of vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. And I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days.”¹

Ironically, and sadly, President Roosevelt’s iconic phrase was hijacked and misused by a Christian pastor in Louisiana just two weeks ago when he defied the state’s stay-at-home order and encouraged church members to gather for worship. Pastor Tony Spell of the Life Tabernacle Church near Baton Rouge told church members that they had “nothing to fear but fear itself.” In announcing that his church would host Easter services today, Pastor Spell was quoted as saying that “true Christians’ see death as a welcome friend. Like any zealot or any pure religious person, death looks to them like a welcome friend. True Christians do not mind dying. They fear living in fear.”²

Thursday morning Linda Burroughs posted a good cartoon on Facebook, which many of you may have seen. It was particularly poignant in light of Pastor Spell’s defiance of the Louisiana stay-at-home order and his recklessness with the lives of his church members and the larger community. In the first panel, a man wearing a sweatshirt that says “I Trust God” is walking and whistling while thinking, “I don’t need a protective mask and hand sanitizer. My God will protect me!” In the second panel, we see the back of his sweatshirt which says, “God is great!” and he proclaims, “My God! I trust you! Save me! Protect me!” In the third panel, the man is lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to an IV line. He angrily shakes his finger at heaven and says, “God, I trusted you but you didn’t protect me!” In the final panel, an apparently chastened man with wide eyes hears a voice from heaven saying, “My son, I gave you a mask and

sanitizer, and told you to keep social distance, stay home, stay safe! But you didn't listen!"

On this Easter Sunday, there is certainly plenty to make us afraid. In the midst of the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, we are all wondering: Will it come here? How bad will it be at its worst? How long will this last? When will life get back to normal? Will life **ever** get back to normal? What about the financial situation – personal and national? Will the virus come back with a vengeance in the fall? When will the children and their teachers go back to school?

So, as we “gather at a distance” to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, it's fair to ask, what does Christ's resurrection have to do with what we're going through in these unprecedented times? A few weeks ago, as the reality of the Covid 19 pandemic began to set in, Judy Wallace shared an important Bible verse that I find myself going back to again and again, from 2 Timothy 1:7: “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”

As I read Matthew's familiar Easter story and thought about its meaning for us in these trying times, it occurred to me that the story is full of fear. In just ten verses, Matthew tells about fear four times:

- When the angel descended from heaven, with his appearance like lightning and his clothes 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.”
- After the women hear the angel's message and instructions to tell the disciples the good news of the resurrection, “they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy.”
- On the way, when they meet the risen Lord himself, they take hold of his feet and worship him, and Jesus tells them, “Do not be afraid.”

What is there to be afraid of on Easter Sunday? Well, if you're the guards posted at the tomb by the chief priests and the Pharisees, and the tomb gets rolled back and your “prisoner” isn't there any more, you're probably fearful of what's going to happen to you when the report gets back to the chief priests and the Pharisees. On top of that, it's not every day you see an angel dressed in lightning like, snow white clothes come down from heaven, accompanied by an earthquake. That's enough to make anybody afraid!

But why are the women afraid? It's not hard to imagine that their initial fear is like the fear all of us feel when a loved one dies. What's going to happen now? What does the future hold? How will I ever deal with my grief? Compound that with the horror of the preceding three days in Jerusalem and the shock and awe of seeing the angel descend from heaven, and it's no wonder the women were afraid.

And yet, the women's fear is qualitatively different from the fear of the guards, at least after the angel speaks to them and says, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.” Although

the story doesn't explicitly say, "And the women believed and rejoiced," their actions demonstrate their faith. They do what the angel – God's messenger – tells them to do. They leave the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and run to tell his disciples. What a refreshingly honest description of those women – and maybe of our own faith even today?

The high point of the story is when the women meet the risen Lord Jesus himself. Again, their actions speak louder than the words that aren't even recorded in the Bible. In response to his "Greetings!" they took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid." Jesus' assurance – not just with his words, but with his very resurrected presence – precedes his commission to the women to be the very first evangelists: "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

It's a strange but true phenomenon that, in the New Testament, the announcement of good news is typically preceded by the heavenly assurance and command, "Do not be afraid."

- When the angel appeared to the old man Zechariah at the altar in the temple, Zechariah "was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.'" (Luke 1:12-14)
- When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to tell her she would bear the Son of God, Mary was much perplexed. But Gabriel said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (Luke 1:26-30)
- When Joseph was considering to dismiss Mary quietly so as to spare her public disgrace, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:19-21)
- When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds in the fields and the glory of the Lord shone around them, "they were terrified." But the angel said, "Do not be afraid: for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah." (Luke 2:9-11)

Receiving the good news from God brings with it a curious mixture of fear and awe and rejoicing and joy and gladness and worship. Today we proclaim the good news of Easter – Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! – in the midst trying times that have reshaped our lives in countless ways, not the least of which is not being able to be together for Easter worship. And yet, as we have heard again and again from the scriptures today, God's good news is always preceded by the assurance "Do not be afraid."

"Do not be afraid" – that is not a naïve statement that ignores the reality of the situation we are in this Easter day. In fact, the angel's assurance to the women was at the tomb where they fully expected to find the dead body of their friend and loved one. And then Jesus' greeting, "Do not be afraid," assured them and called them forward in

the midst of their situation. What someone has said about the women at the tomb is just as true for us today: “The difference between the guards who fell to the ground and the women whose feet stood firm wasn’t the absence of fear, but the presence of joy. The resurrection didn’t tie everything up in a nice bow for them, but when they were able to receive what was presented with joy as well as awe, they were able to accept the angel’s commission to go forward, and eventually meet the Risen Christ.”³

Here is a powerful story about a person’s resurrection faith in the midst of an epidemic and the chaos that ensued. During the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648, a German pastor named Martin Rinkart served in a walled town called Eilenburg. Many refugees from the war flocked to the city, which strained the city’s resources. In 1637, known as the year of the Great Pestilence, the town was suffering from an epidemic and a famine. Of the four pastors in the town, only Pastor Rinkart remained. One left the town, and Pastor Rinkart buried the other two.

The death toll reached 4,480. Some days Pastor Rinkart officiated at 40-50 funerals a day. In May 1637 his wife died. He continued to minister to the people of the town, even giving away and selling almost everything he owned (except enough to take care of his children). He took out mortgages to help feed his neighbors and children.

Near the end of the war, the Swedes surrounded Eilenburg and demanded an enormous ransom which, of course, the besieged town could not pay. Pastor Rinkart tried to reason with the Swedes, but they refused to lower the amount. As the story goes, the pastor returned to the city and said to his fellow citizens, “Come, my children, we can find no hearing, no mercy with men, let us take refuge with God.” As Pastor Rinkart began to pray, the Swedish general was impressed and moved by his faith and his compassion for his people, so he reduced the ransom to less than 5% of the original demand.

Other than the obvious similarity between the sickness that ravaged Eilenburg and the coronavirus that is running rampant in our world today, what’s the importance of the story? Perhaps you’ve never heard of Pastor Martin Rinkart, but you might very well have sung the hymn that he wrote for his children to sing at the dinner table. It goes like this:

*Now thank we all our God With hearts and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done, In whom this world rejoices.
Who, from our mother’s arms, Hath led us on our way,
With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today.*⁴

On this Easter Sunday, when there is much to be afraid of, we hear the good news in a very powerful way, maybe in a much more immediate and urgent way than ever before. “Do not be afraid,” we are told, “I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.” When we meet our risen Lord, he himself says, “Do not be afraid.” And then he says, “Go and tell . . .”

The good news this Easter 2020 can be summed up in the refrain of a beautiful hymn in our Glory to God hymnal (#177):

*Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name.
Come and follow me, I will bring you home;
I love you and you are mine.*

Let us pray: Living God, long ago, faithful women proclaimed the good news of Jesus' resurrection, and the world was changed forever. Teach us to keep faith with them, that we may not be afraid and our witness may be as bold, our love as deep, and our faith as true. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural,” in *The History Place: Great Speeches Collection* at www.historyplace.com.

²J. Edward Moreno, “Louisiana pastor who refuses to stop holding church services says 'true Christians' view death as a 'welcome friend',” April 8, 2020 at www.thehill.com.

³ “Narrative Lectionary – Come, See, Go, Tell (Matthew 28:1-10),” March 31, 2010 at www.revgalpals.org.

⁴Information is taken from “Refugees, Death and Gratitude: The Story Behind ‘Now Thank We All Our Guard,’” at www.aleteia.org.