

Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023  
Matthew 28:1-10

### A New Day Dawning

What would you say is the hardest commandment in the Bible? “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength?” That’s pretty hard, right? Or, is “Love your neighbor as yourself” even harder? How about “Love your enemy?” What about “Thou shalt not covet?” If we’re honest, that one’s really hard. Maybe we should just say all of the Ten Commandment are equally hard and be done with it.

But what about the commandment to not be afraid? Norma Doerksen (almost retired pastor at Trinity Mennonite) and I have been talking about this. (In fact, I think she is opening her last ever sermon at Trinity this morning with that very same question.) Norma tells me that this commandment to not be afraid (in all its variants: fear not, do not let your hearts be troubled, etc.) appears 365 times in the Bible. That’s one for every day of the year! Sounds about right, wouldn’t you say? A perfect, daily discipline.

Apparently, the two Mary’s were afraid. You can hardly blame them. Their whole world had been shattered like a piece of priceless china. The one they considered their Lord, whom they had even dared to believe just might be the Messiah, the Christ, had been killed. Not just killed but crucified. He had hung there, gasping for breath, all night long, until he had finally breathed his last. That was two days ago. And then yesterday had been the sabbath. How ironic—how awful—was that? That day when everything shuts down, when everything comes to a grinding halt. That is, if you’re a Jew. It’s supposed to be a day of holy rest, a day of remembering how the Lord God had created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh. And so you have to wonder, how did the two Mary’s spend their sabbath? Resting? Weeping and wailing, more like.

And then Matthew says that when the sabbath finally ended, as the first day of their next, “new” week was dawning, they went to see Jesus’ tomb.

I usually love to watch the day dawning. That magical time when night turns to day, when a whole palette of beautiful color splashes and spreads and grows along the eastern horizon., until finally, at long last, that beautiful, burning globe we call the sun makes its grand appearance. It never ceases to be breathtaking, and downright hopeful! (Some of us watched the day dawn and the sun rise this morning out at the Hiebert farm. It was glorious.)

But if I had been those two Mary’s, I would have taken no pleasure, no hope at all in that day’s dawn. No, even as that suddenly pallid sun rose, it was fear that reigned supreme.

Make that terror. Because, we are told, “*suddenly there was a great earthquake.*” Now, I have never experienced a “great earthquake”—only a “3 point whatever” one (on the Richter scale), but I’ve heard that a “great” one, a “7 point whatever” one, is absolutely terrifying. And Matthew says that as the ground was quaking, an “*angel of the Lord*” descended from heaven. Matthew pulls out the stops in describing just how terrifying that was. “*His appearance was like lightning,*” he writes. “*His clothing white as snow.*” That’s as white as it gets. In other words, he was absolutely blinding to look at.

Now, lest you think that an angel of the Lord descending from heaven was a common occurrence in the Gospel of Matthew, it wasn’t. In fact, there hadn’t been any angels since the first couple of chapters, during the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth, and then his temptations in

the wilderness. (Just do a search on the word “angel.”) But then in the very last chapter of his gospel, Matthew says that this angel rolls back the huge, heavy stone in front of Jesus’ tomb (which would have been no small feat), and then, sits on it. It’s almost comical! We would have hardly been more surprised if he had blasted it away with a small wave of his hand. Except then there wouldn’t have been anything to sit on. And somehow I can’t help but think that his sitting on the stone is an important detail in the story. As if he’s, like, “La de dah. No big deal. Just chillin’.”

Another important detail is that those tough, highly trained Roman guards began to shake (apparently not just from the earthquake), and they were so terrified that Matthew says they “*became like dead men.*” After which the angel said (not to those poor, incapacitated Roman guards, but to the two Mary’s), “*Do not be afraid.*” He didn’t say why they shouldn’t be afraid; he must have known it would soon become obvious. There was a new day dawning.

Let’s be honest, these are scary, certainly uncertain, maybe even terrifying times we are living in. Right here in Hillsboro. What is Trinity Mennonite going to do after today? I’ll tell you what they’re going to do: they will cease to exist. No more Trinity Mennonite. After 57 years, it’ll simply go up in a puff of smoke.

What are you all going to do, after next Sunday? You will no longer have a pastor at First Mennonite Church. Who’s going to preach and pray and play guitar and make pastoral calls and conduct funerals?

And if you think you’re afraid, what am I going to do? No more job. No more daily, meaningful, identity-assuring responsibilities. Granted, I was recently offered a new job, about ten days ago. I was going to be a hospice chaplain in Wichita! And moreover, they said they wanted me to use my musical gifts! A lot! Fifteen to twenty hours a week; it was a perfect job for me! But then, one week ago today, late in the afternoon, the executive director emailed me to say he had “became aware of” my twelve-year-old ministerial misconduct, and was withdrawing the offer. For a day or two after that, I felt like my world had shattered, like a piece of fine priceless china.

But then a couple of angels visited me, and I was reminded (and to be honest, I needed to be reminded, because I had forgotten completely for a few days) that there is a new day dawning. Trinity Mennonite isn’t going to disappear. Far from it. They’re going to leave behind them a wonderful legacy, that will never go away. Their building is being resurrected into a wonderful new ministry. And they, the people of Trinity, are being resurrected into wonderful, exciting, potential-filled new chapters of their lives. Some of them, I’m told, are even going to start coming here to FMC! After all these years of unspoken hurt feelings! Sounds like a resurrection indeed!

And what about you? My friends, there is a new day dawning. Jesus the Christ has risen! An angel is descending upon you like lightning from heaven. Can you feel the earthquake? You should—it’s at least seven point-something, if not off the scale. The angel has rolled away the stone and is sitting on it, waiting for you. There is a church here, a new church here, ready and waiting to be reborn, to be resurrected. There’s a new day dawning!

And what about me? Well, God has something meaningful in mind. All I have to do is believe it. Believe that there is a new day dawning. (As the father of the possessed child in Mark 9:24 cried out to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief.” That’s one of my favorite verses!)

Let’s be honest, it probably isn’t even humanly possible to never be afraid. But the good news is it’s precisely despite our fear—no, amidst our fear—that Resurrection happens. How

does our Easter story continue? Matthew says that “*they* (that is, the two Mary’s) *left the tomb quickly with fear [ . . . ] and great joy.*” Fear, sure. That’s understandable. But now also joy. Because Jesus Christ has risen. He has defeated death. Satan himself has been kicked out of heaven. (Sure, he’s still around. But he no longer has any real power.

On their way to tell the disciples, guess who “suddenly” met the two Mary’s? That’s right: Jesus. Guess what he said to them? “*Do not be afraid.*” Why? Why shouldn’t they be afraid? Because there’s a new day dawning! And you know what? That’s not a message just for Easter Sunday. That’s a Truth that we need to remember every day, 365 days a year. Might as well get up early each day and watch the sun rise!

Amen.