

“Do Not BE Afraid!” (Easter Sunday, 2020)

By Rev. Dr. Ruth Ragovin

Matthew 27:45-28:10 (NRSV)

The Death of Jesus

⁴⁵ From noon on, darkness came over the whole land^[p] until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ⁴⁷ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” ⁴⁸ At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.”^[q]

⁵⁰ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.^[a] ⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³ After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”^[b]

⁵⁵ Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. ⁵⁶ Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

The Burial of Jesus

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The Guard at the Tomb

⁶² The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³ and said, “Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ ⁶⁴ Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead,’ and the last deception would be worse than the first.” ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, “You have a guard^[c] of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.”^[d] ⁶⁶ So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

The Resurrection of Jesus

28 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² 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. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he^[e] lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead,^[f] and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

I'll never forget the year or the day. The year was 1988 and it was one of the most memorable in my life because I was a Fulbright scholar in West Berlin, Germany, doing research on the great German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher in the archives of the Humboldt University in what was then East Berlin. As my Fulbright year was coming to an end, I was feeling on top of the world. Life was unfolding beautifully. Just a few days previously I had moved out of the apartment on the Sassnitzer Strasse I had rented from a German professor and his wife, the Kohlberts, who were spending a year in the United States. They had just returned to Berlin. I left them my forwarding address and phone number of my friend Gabi's apartment in Berlin where I would be staying for a few weeks before flying back to the States. Another American friend of mine, Tammy, was also staying at Gabi's.

On June 15, 1988, the phone rang at Gabi's and I answered it. It was Frau Kohlbert, the owner of the apartment where I had lived. She said that she had just received a telegram and wondered whether she should read it to me over the phone. I said yes. There was a long pause on the phone and then she said, "Frau Ragovin, I'm sorry to tell you but the telegram says that your mother has died. The telegram says to call home immediately'."

Needless to say I broke into tears and sobbed over the phone. I was in total shock. My friend Tammy comforted me and then she left to go across the city to pick up the telegram from the Kohlerts. As I tried to get through to Canada and the US over the next hour (where it was now the middle of the night) with one family member after another not answering, I moved into the darkest place imaginable. The bottom just seemed to drop out from everything that seemed familiar. I moved into a place of such fear, sadness, disbelief, loneliness, anguish, anger, shock. I catapulted from one dark emotion into another, and my body literally shook. I already missed my mother so much. It was the moment of finality I had always dreaded.

For those who had journeyed with Jesus from his earliest days in Galilee and, when most others had fled in fear, had courageously waited with him as he suffered on the cross, the dreaded moment of finality had arrived.

I can only imagine the shock, pain, and strong emotions of those who witnessed Jesus' death as a common criminal by crucifixion, which Matthew (27:50-56) describes as follows:

⁵⁰ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³ After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" ⁵⁵ Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. ⁵⁶ Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Matthew describes this as an earth-shaking moment not just for those who stood at the foot of the cross that day and felt the rumbles of the earth but also at a cosmic level as the spiritual tectonic plates of the universe were forever altered. God's love prevailed over any and every force of darkness for those of all times and places, past, present, and future, as the releasing of those from the tombs indicates. "Truly this man was God's Son!" was the incredulous, terrified response of those who were overseeing his crucifixion.

Alongside the guards were some women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, supported his ministry, and stayed with him to the very end. The one they loved, who had faced such betrayal and suffering in the final days and hours of his life, the one who only had just begun his public ministry three years earlier was now dead. In addition to their grief, they must have been left with so many questions of WHY? Why so young? Why someone who had only brought a message of love through his life and his teachings? WHY?

On that day on June 15, 1988, I too was left with questions of WHY? Why had my mother, who was only 52 years old, ten years younger than I am right now, been taken from life? What had happened to her? I had only received a letter from her a few days ago and there was no mention of illness. Was she tragically killed in an accident?

I kept calling different family members in both the United States and Canada, trying to get through, and then it occurred to me that they probably were not answering because they were gathered at my mother's home. So I called her house. The phone rang and rang and then a voice answered on the other end. A sleepy "Hello" (since it was the middle of the night there). And then, I realized that the voice on the other end of the line was none other than my mother. "Mom" I screamed. I received a telegram saying you were dead? Are you alive? Is that really you? "Ruth," she said, "what are you talking about?" I told her the story of the phone call that I had received from Frau Kohlbert. I then moved into a place of mass confusion. What was going on? Was someone playing a dirty trick on me? Did someone so dislike me that they were trying to hurt me by sending a telegram saying my mother was dead?

As we talked on the phone, Tammy came walking in the door of the apartment with the telegram in her hand. She said, "Ruth. I have the telegram here and I read it. It is not your mother who died. It is my mother who died. I gave my family your address to contact me in case there was an emergency and so the telegram was sent care of you. But the contents of the telegram were for me. The Kohlberts failed to realize that."

Let's travel back in time and sit beside Jesus' closed tomb as we follow the Easter story according to Matthew and learn about another case of a reported death. We learn that Jesus died as a common criminal on the cross after being betrayed, cross examined, costumed and mocked, humiliated, tortured, paraded, whipped, spat on, stripped, crucified and buried. It is as violent and gruesome story as you will ever read. The kind that gets an R rating where you have to close your eyes during much of it.

A secret disciple of Jesus named Joseph of Arimathea had Jesus' dead body taken down from the cross, wrapped in a clean linen cloth, and placed in a rock-hewn tomb that he actually had purchased for himself. Then he rolled a huge stone over the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and a woman known as "the other Mary" accompanied Joseph while he did this as they sat opposite the tomb (Matthew 27:57-61).

Now Matthew goes to great lengths to assure any future readers of just how secure this tomb was. He relates that the chief priests and Pharisees were incredibly nervous because the word had gone out that Jesus had told people that "after three days I will rise again." They worried that his disciples might try to steal Jesus' body and then deceive people by telling them that he had been raised from the dead. So Pilate allowed guards to be posted to make sure the tomb was secure by sealing the stone and protecting it.

Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, left the guarded tomb and went to their homes, where they sheltered in place, as was the custom on the Jewish Sabbath. Their fear and grief and shock must have been overwhelming. Others from the once thriving band of followers who had celebrated and shouted Hosanna as they followed Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem had fled before the crucifixion and deserted him. They hid behind locked doors, terribly afraid that they might get mixed up in the tragic events and their own lives might be at risk.

Our Easter story begins on a Sunday morning in fear and darkness. Darkness, we know, is much more than the absence of sunlight. Darkness is a spiritual condition in which the presence of God no longer is felt. Mystics call this "the dark night of the soul." As Jesus' disciples sheltered in their homes they found themselves in both a literal darkness before the break of day but also in a spiritual darkness. The man who had told them "***I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life***" (Jn 8:12) had died on a cross. The light of the world that shines in the darkness had been extinguished. The earthly powers had the final say. Evil had defeated goodness. Death had triumphed.

Matthew tells us that, among all Jesus' many followers, there were two women whose faith was bigger than their fears as they decided to venture out of their homes in the twilight hour of that Sunday morning to go and see Jesus' tomb. Their names were Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." Mary Magdalene is important enough for Matthew not only to have given her the second descriptive name of "Magdalene" but, in the Easter story in John's Gospel, which is the one most commonly used as a preaching text on Easter Sunday, she is the only one who goes to the tomb. I've preached numerous sermons on Mary Magdalene but for today I will only mention that she was perhaps Jesus' most important follower, who has been called the Apostle to the Apostles. We can sense just how great she was by how threatened the church authorities were by her close relationship to Jesus and the way that her voice has been marginalized if not silenced through history as she has been unjustly portrayed as a harlot or fallen woman in spite of any serious historical or textual evidence that would support this view. The Gospel of Mary that she wrote, which contains mystical teachings, was seen to be so dangerous and unorthodox that it was banned and portions of it were not recovered until 1896, with an English version not being available until about 1975. Fortunately, her important role and the depth of her spirituality are being proclaimed by contemporary scholars including Cynthia Bourgeault. Since Mary Magdalene plays such a huge role in the Easter story, that is central to our faith, I encourage you to learn more about her.

But who was the person Matthew calls "the other Mary"? That sparks my curiosity. By comparing all four Gospels my best guess is that the "other Mary" was Mary the mother of James [and Joseph].¹ We know next to nothing about her but we can surmise that she was probably Mary Magdalene's close if not best friend who obviously was one of Jesus' inner circle, whose faith was stronger than her fear allowing her to go to the tomb as the first light of the week was dawning.

¹ All the Gospel writers have women at the tomb. We know for John it was only Mary Magdalene. Mark (16:1) says that in addition to Mary Magdalene there was also Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Luke (24:1-12) says that in addition to Mary Magdalene, there were Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women." Earlier in Matthew (27:55) we read that, at the cross, there were "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee."

I like to think of the “other Mary” as a collective representation of all the many women who stayed the course with Jesus until his last breath and beyond, when all the men except John the Beloved had fled.

Matthew’s Easter story continues with these words: *After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake ...*

So there was an earthquake on the day of Jesus’ death and here, on the day of Jesus’ resurrection, we have another earthquake, which are signifiers for God shaking things up on a cosmic level. The fierce storm that went through Murray last Wednesday night that shattered one of the stain glass windows in the church steeple doesn’t come close to what was experienced that Easter Sunday morning. Now the great earthquake the two Marys and the guards at the tomb experienced that first Easter Sunday morning brought other surprises as well. Just listen to what comes next: *²And 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. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.*

Earthquakes and then an angel of the Lord! I love it! This powerful angel dressed in brilliant white clothing comes down from heaven amongst bolts of lightning like a super hero and rolls back the huge stone guarding the tomb and then sits upon it! Earthquakes, angels, clothing white as snow are all code words or signifying terms Matthew uses to depict that we are experiencing a cosmic event. It really doesn’t matter whether you fall into the literalist or the metaphorical camp when you read this scripture as long as you see that what is being communicated is that God is intervening here in a redemptive moment! The historic Jesus of Nazareth is being transformed into the Cosmic Christ. And the guards understood this and were so terrified by the presence of this angel that they became like dead men as they were paralyzed by fear.

The angel doesn't seem to pay much attention to the guards. It is the two Marys he has come to address and then to commission, as he says: Do not be afraid. ⁵***But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid;***

The entire Bible is full of phrases telling people not to be afraid. How about:

- ❖ Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil (Ps. 23).
- ❖ The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? (Ps 27:1)

Do not be afraid! These are the words spoken by the Angel Gabriel to Mary about Jesus' conception; they are the words used to reassure Joseph about Mary's pregnancy; they are the words spoken to shepherds by an angel about Jesus' birth. And now, these words are spoken to the women at the tomb who see the shaken guards lying like dead men as a fierce angel sits calmly on top of the tomb where their beloved Jesus lay. Do not be afraid! These words seem to be the words printed on the angel's calling card.

Have you ever noticed how in the Bible the words "Do not be afraid" are always followed up by Good News! For example do you remember the scripture, ***"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, the Lord."*** (Lk 2:10-11) And today's scripture is similar, starting with fear and ending with Good News!

⁵But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then 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."***

The women, after being told to see for themselves the empty tomb, are commissioned to hurry and give the disciples the message that Jesus has been raised from the dead and is going ahead of them to Galilee, just as he had told them he would!²

² "But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." (Matt 26:32)

They are to proclaim the Resurrection Gospel that good is stronger than evil! Love is stronger than death! After this life there is more life!

I wonder what kind of mental space the two Marys were in as they ran quickly to tell the disciples about the strange turn of events. Somehow, because of the strange mix up that happened when I was first told my mother was dead only to learn a few hours later that she was alive, I somehow get the weirdness, the unsettled feeling, the ‘I must be in the Twilight Zone’ feeling that may have overcome them. I actually think we all kind of “get” that Twilight Zone sensation they must have been feeling much more than we have on recent Easters. After all, on Sunday, March 8, we all woke up expecting to move from Standard Time to Daylight Saving Time but instead moved from Standard Time to Twilight Zone Time as the Coronavirus pandemic hit our country with unexpected vengeance and closed everything down.

That Twilight Zone kind of feeling produces two conflicting emotions in us: fear and faith or, in the case of our Marys of our scripture, fear and joy. Our scripture continues by saying: ⁸*So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.* Fear and great joy! On their way running to see the other disciples, whom should they meet but Jesus himself, and they knelt down and touched his feet, and worshipped him! The scriptures say that: ⁹*Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.*

Greetings! (which might also be translated as “Rejoice”!) To be noted here is the physicality of this event where there is no social distancing but close physical contact. The women reach down to touch his feet. This reminds me of Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus’ feet with nard and wiping them with her hair on his way to Jerusalem (Jn 12:1-8; cf. Matt. 26:6-11). If Mary of Bethany is Mary Magdalene as some recent scholars such as Cynthia Bourgeault believe, it makes me wonder whether she wanted to touch and examine the feet that she had earlier anointed as a kind of reality check.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who has the women touch Jesus, almost as though he wants to reassure his readers that Jesus does not appear in the form of a spirit body or ghost, but he is a real live human being.

And then Jesus speaks directly into their unsettled inner landscape, noting that they came to him with two competing emotions: fear and great joy. He tells them which of these two should prevail.

¹⁰*Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”* First the angel had told them, and now Jesus tells them: Do not be afraid! First the angel tells them and now Jesus tells them “Go and Tell!” Proclaim the Good News of the Gospel that he is risen!

This Easter season as we are sheltered in our homes during a rapidly spreading pandemic, how can we put into practice Jesus’ commandment to not be afraid? We should start by recognizing that our internal landscape is populated by many competing emotions: fear, joy, anxiety, hope, sorrow, love. We might imagine that each of these emotions is a separate house in our internal landscape. We can choose which of these homes we want to live in. Do we want to live in a house of fear? Or do we want to live in a house of joy? As we settle into that house as our primary residence, we actually can become that emotion, especially as we become more accustomed to it and it somehow becomes normalized.

It is so important for us to note that Jesus says we should not BE afraid. There is a huge difference between having an emotion and being that emotion. We can have fear as, for example, our medical workers do as they go out and courageously take care of COVID-19 patients. It is natural and acceptable to have fear. In fact, it is necessary in some cases so that we can protect ourselves. But let’s not make fear our primary residence. Let’s not go and take out a 30-year mortgage on the house of fear. Let’s not BE afraid.

And the way that we can stop making fear our primary residence in our internal landscape and move into a house of great joy instead, is to recognize the difference between having a realistic fear of the things that can happen during a pandemic and being or becoming that fear, as we choose to stand on the promises of scripture that:

²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ... It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So, my friends, do not BE afraid! Today reclaim that Resurrection Gospel that proclaims that Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! And Because He Lives, we can face tomorrow!

Let us pray ...

Loving God, you astound us! You amaze us! You delight us! Just when we thought that death had the final say over Jesus on Good Friday, you remind us once again today that the last word is always yours and your word is the command to LIVE! You call us to live life renewed; to live life abundantly; to live life as though it had no end.

During Lent, Lord, in many Christian traditions it is forbidden to use the word Alleluia! But today we joyously proclaim that:

Christ the Lord is Risen Today! Alleluia!
All creation join to say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, O heavens and earth reply, Alleluia!
Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids us rise, Alleluia!
Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia!

This morning, we your Resurrection people, come proclaiming that love is stronger than death and that there is life after this life! The human Jesus has been transformed by you, God, into the risen cosmic Christ! Love is the most powerful force in the universe and we are a new creation, filled with hope and promise and your Spirit! And with this hope and this promise, we place into your loving care, all those people and situations that are listed in our concerns, including all those that we carry in our hearts that were left unspoken, and we lift them up to you, Jesus the risen Christ!

Amen