

2021 April 4 Rev. Sara M. Holland Sermon

Scripture: Psalm 118 & Mark 16: 1-8

Title: “Fear & Hope”

Theme: Easter, “Now What?”

### Intro

It is, of course, both odd and sad, to be back at home for Easter worship again after the more than 12 months of being at home we have all had. It is unbelievable, really; and yet, it is fully real.

I, like so many of you, recall the beginning of the global pandemic when we thought that maybe we'd back in worship for Easter last year. Sometimes we hope for things that are unrealistic as a way to sustain ourselves. We didn't know at that time, well, most of us didn't, that we'd actually be stuck at home for not one Easter, but 2. I think many of us were afraid of the reality and we had yet to face the fear that was so present. We didn't know what to make of our 'at home at all times' lives just yet. We were alarmed, we felt fear. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, they were alarmed, they felt fear.

This alarm and fear, well I can say that is definitely part of what I'm experiencing right now. I feel fear, some legitimate and some which is simply the result of the traumatic reality that we have had this past year . . . .

We have all been ‘on alarm’ and feel afraid for so long now that it is hard to even envision what this next part of reality will look like. The terror of the pandemic, has seized us, in a way. As we look to see there is a similarity between the fear of the Marys and the fear we have today, it is important for us to consider the etymology of this word, in the context of the scripture we’ve read today. It is very possible that the way fear is described here refers more to great awe and less to the issue of being afraid as one would be at the sight of a spooky ghost. At the same time, the other words that come up in this text are alarm, afraid, terror . . . all that being said, I think there is something here about these first witnesses feeling a sense of fright.

I mean, imagine. First, you have already experienced something deeply troubling. A person you love dearly, deeply has been murdered in the most horrible way. And now, you go to anoint the body, as is fitting with your culture. Upon entering the place where you expect the body to be you find that the body is not there. I feel absolutely sure that I too would have felt fear in this situation. If you are wondering who the character of Salome is, all we really know is that Salome is a follower of Jesus.

*3 minutes, 26 seconds, give or take*

Of course they feel alarmed, of course they feel frightened: Not only had they just witnessed a traumatic event, they now find themselves with an angel, they are in a metaphysical moment of their own and they now have been given a task.

I think I would be scared too if an angel appeared when I was in mourning and told me what to do.

These followers of Jesus are afraid and alarmed for multiple reasons and we have our own fears as unbelievable situations have become realities within this past year.

From the outset, dealing with collective loss, we had to grapple with denial - our routines upended, our opportunities to eat food together taken away. A time when school would be fully at home and we'd be confined to one physical space for days and months on end - unbelievable.

The grace and good news for Easter Sunday is not exactly comforting in the most obvious ways. I was looking and looking for the pastoral part of our gospel reading for this morning and it is there but it is an underlying foundational piece. The pastoral part of our gospel today is a felt and deep part of our faith, it is not easy. See, the word we hear the followers receive this day is "But go." After this transcendent being, this angel has told people who would obviously be startled and scared --- they have been told, "Do not be alarmed," . . . Rather, "Go." These first witnesses are to go and proclaim this truth.

One of my favorite theologians, a professor of Constructive Theology at Drew University, Catherine Keller discusses "Truth and Terror" as it relates to mystery (resurrection is, of course, mysterious).

Keller quotes Leo Tolstoy as he wrote throughout the 19th century. Keller notes: “Tolstoy, who began seriously reading scripture only after the age of fifty, defines the gospel simply indeed: ‘to act to others as we wish them to act to us.’” Keller goes on, “In the context of his writings on nonviolence, the golden rule radiates both personal and political relevance.”<sup>1</sup> The finding here is that another great thinker from the 19th century found the simplicity and complexity of the foundational teaching that Jesus left, that which these first followers were to proclaim, even though they were alarmed and afraid. See in saying that Christ is risen, we are saying that love prevails.

*6 mins 49 seconds, give or take*

I don't want to ask you this morning what your fear is - not that it doesn't matter - because, of course, your fear is important. But, today, I want to ask you this morning, “In what, in whom have you placed your hope?” In what, in whom of you placed your hope?

Does it feel to you that your hope resides in an immanent and transcendent God? See this, this is the God of which we read and sing.

Does your hope lay in the joy given by the voices of children, who trust without reservation?

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<sup>1</sup>Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 40.

Where is your hope? See we all have fear - we all are asking questions about what these next parts of life will be like, *and* we *all* have this deep opportunity to join these early followers. “Go,” says the angel. This is our word today. This is our charge. We need to find the strength within ourselves, even though there is fear.

There is a huge world, a multitude of people who need us to become the alleluias of the world. See Alleluia, as some of you likely know, this word means praise ye the Lord, The form we use most often is Latin but it comes from a Hebrew word. The larger framework of this word, however, shows us that this word is voiced in order to praise God AND it brings joy and truth, mysterious truth, to all people. So as I inquire to you about where your hope is this day, I also ask you how you will be an alleluia for the world? How will you become good news this week? For we have seen miracles and many of us have been blessed many times over by frontline workers, truth tellers, and activists in this past year so we must ask ourselves: how will we be alleluias for the world?

*9 mins, 28 seconds, give or take*

One of the most terrifying things that those of us who are about 30 or older see are the risks that young people take but it is important for us to remember what Jesus said: Jesus said, “In order to receive the kingdom of God you must be like children” Jesus was pointing to that difficulty I referenced earlier - remember, when I mentioned that the pastoral element of our text is underlying today?

Our pastoral care today comes when we accept the gospel challenge.

The challenge for us today is to go - to be those alleluias which the world needs so much. The comfort for us today is that it is in our journey to offer these alleluias we will find peace, we will find grace.

Be like the child, who runs with arms and legs scattered about, running to a parent or grandparent.

Be like the youth, who goes for the backflip while snowboarding without reservation.

Be like the toddler, who oh so bravely makes their way up the stairs, with an embedded awareness that in order to survive they must go. So go - place your hope in Christ's resurrection life and become an alleluia for the world.

Landing on fear or landing on hope - go - go and be an alleluia for the world.

I pray that it will be so this day.

*~11 mins*

## Bibliography

Keller, Catherine. *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*.  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.