

Great Vigil of Easter April 15, 2017

Fear and Joy

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey, Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

There is an old legend about Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. According to legend, after his death, Judas found himself in the bottom of a deep, muddy, and slimy pit where, for a thousand years, all he could do was cry bitter tears of sorrow and regret and repentance. After his tears were finally spent, he looked up and saw a light, and a way out of the pit. So, he decided to climb out. But as he climbed he found the walls so slippery he couldn't hold on, and he hadn't gotten very far when he lost his grip and fell back down to the bottom of the pit where he started to cry again. After another long time, he decided to try to climb out again. This time he got farther, only to slip and fall back to the bottom of that ghastly pit. After another long time, he tried again, and this time he made it all the way out of the pit. And after he pulled himself onto solid ground he looked around he found he was in a room where Jesus and the disciples were sitting around a table. Jesus got up and went to Judas and greeted him with a welcoming hug and said, "We've been waiting for you brother Judas! We couldn't begin until you got here."

While Judas is not mentioned after his death in the Gospels, this legend about him speaks to what the incredible Gospel account of the resurrection means. Tonight, we heard the author of Matthew's version of the Resurrection; which while still telling about Jesus' resurrection, does so with a few details that are unique to Matthew's Gospel. This does not mean it didn't happen; instead these details are intended to help us see how the author of Matthew understands what it means that God raised Jesus from the dead.

As we just heard, in Matthew's Gospel, the Resurrection is not a quiet event; it is literally an earth-shaking one because the ramifications of the Resurrection will indeed shake people to their core. Look how the earthquake and the appearance of an angel who rolled away the stone door of Jesus' tomb affected the supposedly strong, stalwart, battle-worn Roman guards standing watch at the tomb. They fainted in fear, which perhaps was really terror. Obviously, that wasn't what they were expecting. The women who had come to the tomb to grieve, on the other hand, had a different reaction: they felt a mixture of both fear and joy at their encounter with the angel.

It can be reassuring to see fear and joy can share the same space within a human heart. Obviously, this isn't what the two Marys were expecting either, but they were open to this unexpected message. Perhaps hanging around Jesus had helped prepare them for angelic messengers, at least a little bit, which might be why they had room for both fear and joy.

Notice the two feelings didn't cancel each other out. The fear did not diminish the joy, nor did the joy belittle the fear. Most of us here are no stranger to fear; fear is a very human and very normal response to the unknown. However, decisions made only in fear often cause more harm than good, which might be one reason why angels and other messengers from God usually begin their message with the words, "Do not be afraid,". However, even after hearing the dazzling angel's message which included the words, "do not be afraid," the women still felt fear, but it was fear mixed with joy. And this added component might be what gave the women hope and courage to obey the words of the angel to leave the tomb and deliver the message of Jesus' resurrection to the disciples.

Maybe some of us here tonight can relate to that mixture of fear and joy. Sometimes doing something new, even if it is something we believe God is calling us to, can feel both scary and joyful at the same time. Those who joined me distributing ashes on Ash Wednesday this year might have had a similar mix of feelings, or when we gave away coffee and donuts at the beginning of the academic year, or when we opened the chapel. Perhaps when someone starts pursuing a new career or starts school they also feel that holy mixture of fear and joy. Perhaps a complete absence of fear isn't what the message of the angel is calling for; perhaps the message of *do not be afraid* is about not letting the fear control or paralyze, like what happened to the guards, but following God despite any fear.

That is what the women did; they obeyed the angel and hadn't gotten very far when they found themselves in the presence of the Risen Jesus. Many scholars tell us that Jesus' appearance to the women who were on their way to tell the disciples the unbelievable Good News of Jesus' Resurrection reflects the author's belief that the Risen Christ is present whenever the church is doing the work God calls it to do. Because the women obeyed the angel, they met the risen Jesus.

And Jesus' message to them is what brings us back to the old legend about Judas. If you noticed, Jesus' message to the two Marys differs slightly from that of the angel at the tomb. The angel at the tomb commanded the women to tell Jesus' *disciples* he was risen and he will meet them in Galilee. However, Jesus

doesn't ask the women to go to his disciples, but to his *brothers*. Jesus wasn't referring to his biological family; he meant the same people as the angel. But Jesus' message has changed a bit to reflect what Jesus' resurrection means. Jesus' resurrection means God is up to something new; a new work is starting, and Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of this new work; a new world where forgiveness isn't going to be enough. In this new world God is making, reconciliation, restoration of relationship between humanity and God the new work of God's new world of resurrection life.

By referring to his disciples as his brothers, the author of Matthew's Gospel is telling us for Jesus all is not only forgiven between him and the disciples who left him to suffer death; now they are reconciled, they are welcome and included at Jesus' table and are part of the new world God is making not in a distant heaven, but in this very world we live in now, a world still marked with sin and fear and death and power, but now, after the resurrection, there is a good amount of joy mixed in with it all.

This is what is at the heart of the legend about Judas; that no matter who you are or what you have done, Resurrection Life is waiting to welcome you with open arms into this new world. Of course, this can be pretty hard to believe and accept. Award winning author and speaker Madeline L'engle wrote about a time her son-in-law told the Judas legend to a gathering of clergy and was surprised by the large number of clergy who were offended by it; offended by the idea that Judas could be welcomed back into the arms and community of Jesus. Perhaps that is one reason why many people have such a hard time with the Resurrection of Jesus; because it frightens them that anyone, even Judas, could be welcomed by God into the new world God is working on. Perhaps we all can too easily forget there is a frightening side to the angel's message of Jesus' resurrection.

But tonight, we have something to help that fear: the joy of the Good News that not even death on a cross was powerful enough to keep God from loving us, all of us, no matter how important we are or aren't, and that all of us are welcomed and invited into the scary and joyful resurrection life God started with Jesus.

Alleluia Christ is risen!