

Do Not Be Afraid

Colossians 3:3-4; Matthew 28:1-10

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC, Camden; April 12, 2020 Easter Sunday

“Do not be afraid,” the angel in our text proclaims. Christ is risen! Hallelujah! The stone has been rolled away from the confinement and seeming finality of the grave. This is such a wonderful and much needed message for our world during this pandemic as so many of us are feeling afraid, stifled, lonely and confined. We also see how many people are seeing their livelihood threatened and may fear that what they have worked for for years may come to an end to no fault of their own. Our own sense of mortality is heightened while we process how many have or may die. This toll includes so many medical staff and other vital personnel at hospitals who have risked their lives to answer their call to serve and heal.

You may recall that New York Governor Cuomo recently made a passionate plea to medical personnel around the country to consider coming to COVID 19 hotspot NYC to serve where more than 7000 people have died. It is a risky call to answer and yet many have done so, not only in response to the need in NYC but also elsewhere. Lisa Love is one of over 29 nurses from Atlanta who have upended their own lives and their family’s lives to answer the call. Lisa is African-American woman and has two children at home in Georgia. They do miss each other terribly but feel it is important that Lisa leave home to use her skills where most needed.

Lisa didn’t really know what to expect when she came to NYC. Seeing the suffering and dying has at times felt overwhelming to her. Lisa’s most pressing concern though has been the suffering of all the patients and their families because they cannot be with each other. Her message on NPR was aimed at them when she said something like, “I want you to know that sick people are not alone. We are the best next thing [to their families] and we are there for them! Please know and trust that.” Lisa is offering compassion and solace as well.

What moves Lisa and people like her to go and serve? And what motivates others like the business owners who donate food to feed staff members like her in NYC and the innkeepers up here to bake staff at Pen Bay to homemade goodies? What motivates those who help provide

child care for medical worker's children despite the potential risk? What has been stirring in the hearts of those of you who have spent countless hours making masks? Or those of you who have been making a delivery for a neighbor or volunteered at the food pantry to put together packages for pick-up? Or those volunteers at local food kitchens that still operate even in modified form? What is motivating those of us who MUST shelter in place as vulnerable populations to donate extra funds, to pray and extend companionship by phone or online, or to work behind the scenes to connect people to resources?

There is something in us that allows us to reach beyond our fear to each other. Our Easter Gospel tells the story of such an opening of the heart. Let us enter the story with Mary Magdalene and Mary as they come to the tomb.¹ The tomb is guarded because the authorities have been frightened by the "imposter" Jesus' prediction that he will rise again after three days (Mt 27:63).² The guards who represent all the forces that have opposed Christ's message so far prove to be completely powerless in light of what happens next. A mighty earthquake shakes the ground and an angel of the Lord appears. The guards are so scared that they become, as the story says, "like dead men." They and all they represent is unmasked for what it is: 'lifeless.'

In contrast, the radiant angel who appears rolls away the stone without effort and sits on it. I love that! This stone which was intended to keep in a corpse and keep away grieving friends has now been turned into a platform for proclamation. It has been repurposed not to guard death but to embolden life because despite the cross the power and authority of God is proving to be greater than any earthly authority or obstacle to God's love. Jesus has risen indeed as the living Christ! He has done so after dwelling among the dead as if to reassure us that they, too, are part of God's resurrection promise.

¹ Perhaps it was Jesus' mother but the text does not clarify and the different Gospel stories vary in terms of who comes to the tomb. However, it is always the women who come first and are tasked with sharing the good news.

² After the resurrection, the same guards are bribed to say that Jesus' disciples had come to steal his body (Mt28:11-15). This story detail is only found in Matthew and may be a device to debunk claims that Jesus did not really rise from the dead. Of course, the guards are also an example of how weak the powers that be really are in contrast to God's power to transform our lives.

The angel now turns to the women and speaks the familiar words: “Do not be afraid!” Can you hear the echo of the Christmas message in these words? “Do not be afraid!” Right now, the presence of the Camden (Christmas/Holiday) Star lit up again on Mt. Battie is a potent reminder of this! It was even lit Easter morning – a big thank you to Peter and Amy Rollins and their friends who are lighting the star! At Christmas we affirmed that God chooses to be born among and within each of us under the most trying and humble circumstances. In the Christ child, God says to us in the most vulnerable way: “I am with you and I need you to be with me. Say yes!”

And now it is Easter Sunday morning, and again we hear: “Do not be afraid!” On Easter we affirm that God is still with us, leading us through death into new birth, new life! We need not be afraid as we witness how Mary Magdalene and Mary’s model their ‘yes,’ their deeper trust with their own lives. They immediately heed the angels call to become angels, that is messengers, themselves to tell the male disciples that Christ will meet them in their homeland of Galilee. These female followers waste no time. Their initial fear is giving way to great joy (Mt 28:8). And lo and behold, as soon as they risk the journey, Christ appears to them directly, saying: “Do not be afraid!” And neither shall his “brothers” be afraid despite their betrayals of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. He calls them all to Galilee and essentially says: “I am with you and I need you to be with me. Say Yes!”

The brothers and sisters/students of Jesus will begin their work from Galilee where their own roots and connections are. Together, they will bring enough gifts to make a difference.³ Eventually, the Holy Spirit will send them out from there to bring people together from far and wide in a common purpose that is greater than themselves. First, they will have to find the courage to come out of their caves of hiding in fear. We are also being asked to offer our ‘yes’ to the God of the resurrection as we heed Christ’s call to meet him right where we are rooted. We find Christ everywhere where need, suffering, pain, injustice and death are met with

³ Galilee is also home to many Gentiles, non-believers, who will be invited into the ever-widening covenant with God.

courage, love, compassion and life-giving presence. We are reconnected to a much deeper and universal identity in which we are all one.

I believe that this message lies at the heart of our text from Colossians which says: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (3:4).” I know that this can sound life denying and set up false dualisms. Often when the Bible names “flesh” or “earth,” it is referencing an ego-focused, ego-based way of existing and interacting. Anything that shows us our interconnected belonging, even our oneness in Christ, is “from above” or beyond a more limited perspective. Our truest self is hidden in Christ, that is we are part of who Christ is, here and now. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in this identity as we roll away stones from graves together.

These are the stones in front of the grave of scarcity thinking that lead to hoarding, circling the wagons and a lack of generosity. We need to roll away the stone of scapegoating Asian Americans. We must roll away the stone of racial inequality that leaves African-Americans and Latinos dying in greater numbers.⁴ We can continue to roll away stones of inefficient bureaucracy. We can roll away stones that lead to people losing jobs rather than being maintained in them during this crucial time. With over 17 million who have filed for unemployment or losing their businesses, we must roll away stones of shame and despair. We are called to roll away stones of greed and competition that are pitting states against each other in bidding wars for vital medical equipment and tests. We are called to roll away stones that leave people isolated and unsupported while trying to stay sober and sane in a time of crisis. We must address the stone of domestic violence, the threat of increased homelessness and food insecurity. No matter what it costs us.

⁴ African Americans have also at times been exposed to medical experiments without their knowledge of consent (e.g. the *Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* in which male inmates in a prison were intentionally infected with syphilis without consent and denied to treatment in order to study the effects of the disease).

Most importantly, Christ calls on us to keep rolling away the stone of our own fear each day and over and over again replace it with the power of compassion toward ourselves and others that opens doors of the heart between us. Whenever we do so, we meet the living Christ who says, “Don’t be afraid” no matter what happens. You are not alone. Let us do that which is ours to do by the guidance of the Holy Spirit whether we are like Lisa Love or whether our ministry is to check on our neighbor, write a check for the food pantry, and pray for those suffering. Together, we will be strong enough to roll away the stones of this pandemic. The way will open as we remind each other that Christ goes before us to meet him. Giving ourselves to a power and purpose greater than ourselves when the odds seem stacked against us – ***that is Easter living***. It is in our spiritual DNA, people of God. Trust it, live it, say ‘yes’!