

FEAR AND GREAT JOY

By Dean Feldmeyer
Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

Matthew 28: 8

“So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.”

LIVING ON THE EDGE

I was never a very good basketball player.

I was big so I always made the cut and was on the team. Seventh, eighth and ninth grade I practiced every day and spent most of the games sitting on the bench.

I never developed an instinct for the game. I had to think about everything I did. Pass? Shoot? Dribble? Well, not dribble, really. I couldn't dribble the ball very well so my choices always amounted to pass or shoot. And I had to think about which one I was going to do.

For three years I practiced and the only time I ever got into a game was when we were winning or losing by such a huge margin that it didn't really matter what I did. A minute in one game, thirty seconds in another. You know how it goes.

Then, in 1966 I was on the junior varsity team and that year the varsity team was pretty bad and they suffered some injuries and some players got benched because of grades. Several of my fellow JV players got sent up to play varsity for a few games and Coach Schmidt, the JV coach, came to me and said the words I longed to hear for four years: “Dean, you're starting at center on Friday.”

It was everything I had worked for. Everything I had dreamed of. Everything I had hoped for.

I was very happy. And scared to death.

I was filled with both fear and great joy.

A couple of years ago things came together perfectly so we were able to take a vacation with the whole family. Sarah and Adam got the time off. Ben and Carrie and Luke got the same week off. Everyone had a little extra cash. We had a car that we could count on.

We managed to find a condo in Myrtle Beach that we could afford. We got through the weeks just before the trip without mishap; no one got sick; no major catastrophes in the extended family.

We made it right up to the night before we were supposed to leave and I couldn't sleep. I laid in bed with my eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling fan, my mind racing.

I was so happy. There's nothing that I love more than spending time with my kids and, now, my grandkids. This was going to be so much fun. I had looked forward to this vacation for so long, worked so hard at planning it.

And I was so scared. I knew from experience how fragile vacations are, how a week of rain, a blown transmission, a bout of food poisoning, hurt feelings, lost money, or even a single cockroach can reduce even the best planned vacation to a pile of smoking rubble.

I confess to praying for a good vacation: Dear God, please let this go well.

I was filled with both fear and great joy.

Thirty eight years ago this July a younger, slimmer, more agile version of myself took the stage for a second time in the role of Professor Harold Hill in Meredith Wilson's classic musical comedy, “The Music Man.”

I had played the part my senior year in high school and was sure that nothing in my life would ever equal the joy that had been mine on that stage, but now, here I was on even a bigger stage, with a bigger orchestra and a bigger, more age appropriate cast of adults, all amateurs, to be sure, but seasoned veterans of the stage, members of the Deer Park Community Theater Company.

It was a dream come true for me and I was standing back stage waiting to take my place for the opening scene, seated with my back to the audience at the center of the train car set.

I heard the audience quiet as the lights went down, some light applause as the orchestra conductor took his place and raised his baton. The orchestra started to play the overture and the stage manager whispered the final call: “Places! Places!”

I walked out onto the stage and nodded to the other actors. They smiled and nodded back to me, some giving the thumbs up. I felt my heartbeat quicken, my stomach flutter as a few drops of adrenaline surged into my bloodstream.

I took a deep, cleansing breath and sat down.

It's a very special kind of happiness to be doing something that you really, really want to do and know that you can do well. And it's a very special kind of fear that tickles the edge of your consciousness at times like that and gives you that drop of adrenaline that heightens your senses and puts you at the very front edge of your abilities.

As the curtain opened behind me and the lights came up, the guy playing the train conductor shouted his opening line and I found myself filled with both ***fear and great joy.***

When I look back on the highest, most significant, most important, most authentically human moments of my life I discover that they were all moments of both fear and great joy.

My wedding.

My ordination.

The births of my children and my grandson.

When my first play was published and then produced on stage.

The first Sunday that I stood in this pulpit.

And to a certain degree, every time I stand here the experience is one of great joy for me and not a little fear.

Will I say the right thing? Will I be understood? Will my exposition of the text be an accurate and faithful one?

Will I lose my place and stumble around? Will I be boring? Will they get the point? Will they laugh at the funny parts?

There are few things that I would rather do than preach the gospel, and there are few things that scare me more.

Preaching is an undertaking that is, if done right, filled with fear and great joy.

That is the phrase Matthew uses to describe the experience of those two women in that first Easter: fear and great joy.

RESURRECTION

It was the day after the Sabbath, the first day of the week. Sabbath had ended at sundown the night before and now the normal, six day work week was beginning. Sunday morning was a work day for most people but these two women took the day off to go to the tomb. Their reason, according to Matthew, was simply to see it, like when we go to visit a grave of a loved one. Maybe we take some flowers, or something the deceased owned that we can touch in order to feel closer to them. Or maybe we just take our memories and our love. We go to see the grave and remember.

Suddenly there was an earthquake, a big one.

This region was and is prone to earthquakes so this was not in and of itself shocking. What is amazing about this particular earthquake is the cause of it. No tectonic shifts this time. This time the cause is an angel who has used the force of an earthquake to roll back the big stone that was covering the opening of the tomb.

This is an angel with attitude. He is surrounded by light as bright as lightening and his clothing is as white as snow and he is sitting on the stone he has rolled back. Probably with his legs crossed, sipping from a demitasse of espresso, a little smile curling the corner of his mouth.

The guards are so shocked and awed by this appearance that they faint dead away.

Then the angel says a curious thing to the women. I like the King James Version for this. I think angels should always talk in the King James English, probably with British accents: "Be not afraid."

Where have we heard that before? Be not afraid? Be not afraid? Hm-m-m-m-m.

Oh, wait. I remember. It was back at the beginning of the story. In Matthew 1:20 the angel tells Joseph, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife."

And in Luke it's the phrase that introduces nearly every angelic utterance: The angel tells Zechariah, "Do not be afraid, your prayers have been heard." (1:13) Then he says to Mary, "Do not be afraid, you have found favor with God." (1:30) And then, in the most famous incident of all, the angel tells the shepherds, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." (2:10)

In fact that phrase appears seventy seven times in the Bible, twelve of those in the gospels. But most importantly for our purposes this morning, it is the phrase that bookends the life of Jesus. It is there, spoken by the angels, at the beginning of his life and it is there, again, spoken by the angels, at the end. Or, more accurately, it is the phrase that is spoken at the beginning of his life as Jesus of Nazareth, rabbi, teacher, and healer, and it is the phrase that is spoken at the beginning of his life as Jesus, the resurrected Christ.

Apparently, the writers Matthew and Luke both thought there was something about the life of Jesus both before and after his death that was inherently scary, something so intimidating or awesome that it needed to be prefaced with the phrase, "BE NOT AFRAID!"

Well, I don't know about you, but I think Matthew and Luke guessed right. I think this whole resurrection thing is just a little bit scary. It's good. It's great, in fact. But it's a little scary, too. But we'll get to that in a minute. First, let's finish the story and see where it goes.

The angel treats this whole resurrection event kind of matter-of-factly. We leave the King James Version for a more colloquial American idiom: "Don't be afraid, ladies. I know what you're here for. You're looking for Jesus." Then, because Jesus is a fairly common name, he clarifies, further, "...who was crucified."

The angel goes on: "Well, he's not here. He's been raised, just like he said he would be. See, look. Right there is where he was lying. Before he was raised, that is." Presumably, they accept the invitation and look into the empty tomb.

The angel continues: "So, here's what you do. You go tell his disciples, and I quote, 'He has been raised from the dead, and, indeed, he is going ahead of you to Galilee (where this whole thing began). He'll meet you there.' End of message."

So they left the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. There it is. Fear and great joy. It is a moment of great joy but the impact is heightened by just a little fear. Fear is the grain of salt on the caramel. It is the dash of chili powder in the cocoa. It is the little pinch of pain that sharpens and clarifies the pleasure.

And as they run they are confronted with Jesus himself, fresh from the grave. He greets them with one word. "Greetings!" Exclamation point! Eugene Peterson, realizing that hardly anyone actually talks like that uses the phrase "Good morning!" Again, with an exclamation point and, perhaps a big smile.

Instantly recognizing him, they fall at his feet and worship him and what, do you suppose, does he say to them when they do this? "Do not be afraid."

Then he adds, "Go tell my brothers that I'm going to Galilee and I'll meet them, there."

MORE THAN RESUSCITATION

Again with the "Be not afraid."

Over and over again he says it. Because resurrection changes all the rules.

This isn't just resuscitation. Resuscitation we see all the time. It's like reanimation – a return from death, back to the same old life. Elijah reanimated the widow's son. One minute he was dead and the next minute he was living again. Same kid, same life as before.

Peter reanimated Tabitha. She was dead then she was alive again. Same old Tabitha.

Lazarus was dead and starting to decompose and then he was alive again and fresh as a daisy. Same old Lazarus.

But Jesus was not just reanimated. He was not simply resuscitated. He was resurrected. He died Jesus of Nazareth and he was raised Jesus the Resurrected Christ.

Reanimation we can handle. It has even become commonplace for us. Something we thought was dead is suddenly alive. Corporations get bailed out. Broken vases get glued back together. Ideas get reworked. Houses get restored. Broken bones get set and grow back together. People get reformed. Hearts get defibrillated. We have grown accustomed to tales of tunnels and bright lights.

Reanimation has nearly become a cliché. A thing or a person is dead and then they are alive again. But they are, for the most part, the same as they were before. The healed bone is still a bone. The bailed out bank is still a bank. The restored house is still a house. The defibrillated heart is still a heart. John or Jill or Jason who died on the operating table was resuscitated back to who they formerly were, back to John or Jill or Jason.

Reanimation returns us to that which we formally were.

Resurrection, however, delivers us to new life. After resurrection we are something other, something better than what we were before.

Resurrection delivers us to NEW life. And new life always makes new demands upon us.

We know this instinctively.

We watch Lybia and Egypt and Syria. The old is slipping away but the new is not yet. Will there be resurrection to new life or just reanimation of the old? Will the results of the demonstrations and revolutions be freedom and democratic government, tolerance and acceptance? Or will the old form of oppression just be replaced by a new form of oppression. Will we see resurrection from old life to new or will we see reanimation of the old life?

Japan. Even as the leaders of this wounded nation try to deal with the immediate devastation of the earthquake and tsunami, there is talk of rebuilding and recovery. But what kind of recovery will it be? Will the hunger for cheap energy continue to ignore the risks associated with nuclear power or will the search for safe, clean alternative forms of energy be redoubled? Resurrection to new life or reanimation of the old?

The American housing industry has, in the past few weeks, entered a second slump even lower than the first of two years ago. Economists and those who should know tell us that it will be two years before the housing industry recovers and the job market with it.

The recovery of the American economy is taking longer than anyone hoped it would. Economists tell us that the recession ended long ago but those whose unemployment compensation has run out don't see it.

They understand what the children of Israel meant when they told Ezekiel "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." (Ez. 37:11) When economic recovery finally comes, when those bones come together and walk, what will it look like? Will it be resurrection to new life or just reanimation of the same old patterns that brought us to recession in the first place?

Politicians, celebrities, and athletes rise to power, fame and glory and then fall. An unguarded rant, a bout with substance abuse, an arrest and conviction sends them to the B or even C list. They do their time or their community service, or they enter the private sector, or maybe they go into rehab and a few months or years later they reappear and want our cheers, our adulation, our admiration, even our vote.

Are they resurrected, as they claim? Or are they simply reanimated, delivered back to their old habits, vices and excesses? And how can we know?

EASTER PEOPLE

Life is, for us, more than a straight line that starts and birth and ends at death.

And resurrection is, for us, more than just an extension of that line. We die, figuratively speaking, time after time, throughout our lives. We fail, we lose, we are ridiculed, we are betrayed by those we thought were our friends. We discover that we've been lied to, those we counted on let us down, our dreams are dashed, our hopes get crushed.

And then, somehow, we rise and we go on.

The question which we ask ourselves on Easter has to do with the nature of that rising.

Is it just reanimation, or is it resurrection.

After we have grieved for three days the stone rolls back and we are invited to walk out of the tomb with Jesus.

Into what kind of life will we walk?

Will we return to the old life that delivered us to that tomb in the first place?

Or will we be resurrected to new life, new energy, new possibilities, new realities that we never saw before?

Will we continue to breathe the damp, fetid air of the tomb or will we fill our lungs with the sweet, fresh breath and spirit of the Living God?

We are Easter people, brothers and sisters.

We live by the promise of resurrection and all that it offers – a little fear, yes.

But wholeness, as well. And authenticity. And hope and love and grace and joy.

Yes, great, great joy.

AMEN