

SERMON- EASTER (A)

Charles R. Cowherd

Acts 10:34-43

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

Good Shepherd, Burke (Online)

April 12, 2020

Jeremiah 31:1-6

Matthew 28:1-10

OPENING:

Jesus said: "Do not be afraid."

I speak to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

In the Cold War, we had DEF CON levels 1-5.

In the War on Terror, it was a Color-coded system, green to red.

For earthquakes, it's the Richter scale; for Hurricanes, Category 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

Today, we wake up wondering where we are on the curve, when we will eventually flatten that thing.

Guess what, Easter happens anyway.

On that 1st Easter, the disciples had fled, were 'socially isolated' in the Upper Room. Jesus had been crucified and buried. The tomb was sealed and guarded by Roman Soldiers.

Guess what, Easter happened anyway.

On this Easter, we don't have the Easter Egg Hunt, it seems we have no *cascarones* to smash on Christine's head, no women with large Easter hats, no congregational singing of our favorite hymns, maybe no Easter Brunch with our extended families.

Guess what, Easter happens anyway.

God has rolled away the tomb, broken down death's doors
and "He is Risen."

Easter has happened anyway.

Now don't get me wrong, come 2021, we will do it up right and come back together here and have a celebration with more pastel and brass and chocolate than one can imagine.

But right now, Easter has happened anyway, we celebrate it not *at* church, but *as* the Church of the Good Shepherd, as the Body of Christ, recognizing that Christ's Body was raised out of that tomb on that first Easter Morning, turning everything upside down with it.

Next week, we will begin to broadcast these services not from our beautiful church, but from our less beautiful homes, and Easter will have happened anyway.

Finally, if for some reason, this pandemic were to continue, Lord help us, for another year, Easter would still happen and the instructions would still be the same: "He is Risen."

FEAR:

In spite of our greatest fears, all throughout history, when plagues struck and wars made their way throughout the nations... Easter happens anyway.

Now, through all of them, there has always something to be afraid of. Oftentimes, like now, there were good reasons to be afraid of something BUT...

"Do not be afraid": the Angels tells Mary Magdalene and the other Mary.

"Do not be afraid": Jesus tells the two a few moments later.¹

Since we are living through a time of such great fear, maybe we notice more, this year, just how scary that first Easter morning must have been for everyone, especially for the two women at the tomb.

Because, either, Jesus' dead body is there and everything Jesus had told them has been false. Or, the body is not there, and some really weird stuff is happening.

A quick historical note: people 2000 years ago knew that when you died, you did not come back to life. Sometimes from our modern perspective, we like to take condescending view that only modern science has discovered that pattern. But they understood, in 1st century Palestine, that when someone dies, they don't come back to life. The Jews knew it, the Romans knew it, the Greeks knew it. Everyone know it.²

¹ Matthew 28.5, 28.10

² Wright, N.T. 2003. *The Resurrection and the Son of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 10.

That's why Resurrection was and is so scary and terrifying.

When Easter happens, fear is an appropriate reaction. That's why the Angel has to say "Don't be afraid" and why Jesus has to repeat it two seconds later.

Neither of them is saying that everything is going to be 'hunky-dory' from here on out. Easter does not mean smooth sailing, or that our troubles have been erased, or nothing can then go wrong. It does not mean that we have escaped this world, or that our fears are not well-founded.

So, tomorrow, we will still be self-isolating, working from home, and under threat of this virus.

But, Easter does mean that God is here, God's love wins, that we are not alone in facing those fears.³

That life goes on is scary too. If Jesus had not been resurrected, the disciples and the Mary's lives actually would have been much easier. They would have been following a fraud but they could slinked back to Galilee with their tails between their legs.

But, since Easter has happened, they have instead received marching orders to go to Galilee, to start this thing called the Church, and they are about to go on the ride of their lives, lives which will often end in violent death.

JOY:

Life and Death. Victory and defeat. Fear and Easter Joy.

It's all such a weird mixture in this Easter story and for us on this Easter Day.

It reminds me of the story of how when author Robert Louis Stevenson was critically ill and dying. He got a letter from a rather self-absorbed missionary who wanted to come and talk to Stevenson because he was (quote) "a man in danger of dying." Stevenson replied with his famous wit that the missionary should instead visit him as "a man in danger of living. I am a very sick man, but suppose I get better! Any fool can die; as a matter of fact, all do. I'm going to need much more help if I go on living."⁴

³ Martin B. Copenhaver. 2014. "Pastoral Perspective" *Feasting on the Word (Year A, Volume 2)* Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press. 348, 350.

⁴ Cousar, Charles B. 2003. "Make It as Secure as You Know How." *Journal for Preachers* (26:3) 18.

Matthew can only describe Easter with such a paradox of fear and joy. The Mary's are scared as heaven of what's going on but also bursting with joy to proclaim it.

So the first Easter morning is like a 5 year old rolling down a hill, tumbling and rumbling down, excited and happy, but also scared because they cannot control it and not sure of what the result will be.

Someone once compared that first Easter morning as similar to “the kind of feeling we have when we fall in love, when we witness the birth of a child, when we lean over the rim of the Grand Canyon, joyous and fearful at the same time.”⁵

Fear and Joy.

That's the kind of life that we sign up for as followers of Jesus, the type of life that is “so compellingly true that we have no time to be afraid.... (where) we are so caught up in the joy that comes with serving (Christ)” that we realize that God “has made it possible for us to live unafraid.”⁶

CONCLUSION:

We cannot really control that kind of life.

They and our reactions to them just happen.

This Easter of all Easters reminds us that Easter doesn't happen by making us the day perfect.

God makes Easter happen no matter what we do.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Easter happens anyway, with fear and trembling and an overabundance of joy, we have received this message and we are called to share it: “Do not be afraid, He is risen!”

AMEN⁷

⁵ Richard S. Dietrich. 2014. “Exegetical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word*. (Year A, Volume 2.) Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 349, 351

⁶ Hauerwas, Stanley. 2015. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: 245-249.

⁷ I first came across the idea of “Easter happens anyway from the Pulpit fiction podcast (“Easter A” *Pulpit Fiction Podcast* [Episode 373, April 12, 2020] <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/eastera.>), Later on in the sermon process, the idea seemed everywhere: e.g. Bishop Michael Curry “It feels like winter — but Easter is happening anyway.” *Washington Post* (4/10/2020) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/10/we-are-never-alone/?arc404=true#Curry>. Likewise, the idea to concentrate on Easter “fear” was ubiquitous: e.g. Russell Moore. “Easter Fear is Natural” in *Christianity Today* (April 12, 2020) <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/russell-moore-easter-fear-natural.html>.