

Fear and Resurrection

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

April 12, 2020 – Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10

Perhaps you remember...

- On Sunday, March 8, we humorously bumped elbows or fists as we passed the peace in worship.
- On Tuesday, March 10, the Session discussed further ways to stop the spread of a still largely unknown virus, not passing the offering plate, placing hand sanitizer dispensers everywhere.
- On Thursday, March 12, about an hour before Pennsylvania Governor Wolf's recommendation, we postponed worship, or, rather, moved worship from our beloved sanctuary, this beloved sanctuary, to the online world.

This church, with so many churches, is finding creative and innovative ways to worship and engage in ministry and staying connected in this season, "redefining the "norm,"" as a friend of mine says.

So welcome – welcome members of the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Welcome – all who may be online guests; we are grateful that you've found us. Come back, online now and in person when you can. Welcome.

"Inconceivable" as Vizzini from "The Princess Bride" might say, inconceivable, though that term barely describes it.

- Inconceivable that a primal, microscopic virus has driven our 21st century, seemingly invincible world to its knees.
- Inconceivable that so many are ill and so many have died.
- Inconceivable that so much we have taken for granted – going to work, to school, to the store, to the movies, to church, is simply not possible.
- Inconceivable – but not surprising – that people of color and poor people are disproportionately impacted by this disease; already at higher risk, they do not have the privileged capacity to engage in social distancing.

- Inconceivable that “social distancing” and “flattening the curve” and Anthony Fauci and the Cuomo brothers and “Tiger King” and face masks are a part of the common vernacular.

So much is inconceivable, and not all of it unwelcome, though I want to be careful in what we label a “silver lining.” I am reading too much about some things and not enough about other things but enough good things that suggest that when we arrive on the other side of this, that there will be some gifts of grace.

- Time with family spent, and better time.
- Appreciation for nature and art.
- Gratitude for the truly heroic doctors and nurses and health care workers who not only are saving us, but doing so at great peril to themselves and their families.
- Thankfulness for teachers. Yay teachers!
- Recognition of grocery store staff, restaurant workers.
- Concern for musicians who rely on regular gigs to make ends meet.
- Phone calls with long lost friends.
- Contemplation about the things that really matter, reflecting rather than reacting.

For the church, we have been reminded how important community and connection is. We have missed that physically, but have found other ways to make it happen. I can’t believe I am saying it, but thank God for Zoom, for Facebook Live, for Facetime. We have affirmed how important worship is, even as we have gathered online. Worship is essential, even when in person worship is not possible.

Thanks to our creative staff, we have managed the technology pretty well, but what has really mattered – as you all keep telling me – is seeing faces and hearing voices and gathering around prayer and music and the word. We will keep doing some things like this on the other side. We will also, I hope, keep growing our efforts to support the poor of our city, in word and deed. We have accelerated and increased our financial support to our mission partners.

As I said, we have found things for which to be thankful in this coronavirus season, glimpses of hope, moments of joy, often having to do with loving connections or acts of kindness and compassion, often spontaneous, or noting the beauty – the absolute beauty – of springtime all around us.

And yet. And yet. There is sadness. You know. And concern, deep concern. And disappointment. And fear, real fear. But mostly sadness.

It's not a very sophisticated feeling to articulate, almost childish. But it's the right word.

- I am sad things like proms and commencements are cancelled, or reconceived.
- I am sad jobs are lost and hours reduced and difficult decisions are being made by people to people.
- I am sad my beloved family is dispersed today – we had planned on being together to celebrate.
- I am sad to miss March Madness and Opening Day and the Olympics – I realize that sports is trivial compared to thousands of deaths, yet it gives many of us great joy and is such a positive social connector.
- I am sad – and concerned – that some congregations will not be able to survive all of this.
- I am concerned – and hopeful – that we will find the collective resilience to make it, whatever that looks like.
- I am deeply sad that people are dying without being able to be physically comforted by loved ones.
- I am sad – and fearful – that not only do we not know what is on the other side, what a “new” normal and then a “new” “new” normal will look like, we don't even know when that will be.
- I am sad – and other emotions – imagining the enormous societal stress we will face as people fully absorb the reality of lost savings, businesses and jobs. (See Thomas Friedman, *New York Times*, April 7, 2020)
- I am troubled that our current politics will be unable to rise to the task of recovery.
- I am angry that some religious leaders are actually viewing this virus as some sort of divine punishment; if that's who God is, count me out.

I am sad we can't gather in the sanctuary. Yes, the church is not the building. And yet, Jesus is God's incarnate word, and church is communal, physical, relational, incarnational. I miss that.

Among the things I miss the most is singing in a group, and singing the great Easter hymns. The cultural expectation has kind of faded away that even if people

don't show up for church much at all, they do so on Christmas and Easter. And because of that, when people do show up now, they show up for a reason. I miss that in person, very, very much, and am still a little discombobulated that it is not happening.

Yet we do it this way, perhaps even more powerfully, because, thank God, not only does something about this story draw you to your screen, but something about this story still matters. The point of Easter worship is not, ultimately, the flowers, the big hymns and brass and percussion and the pageantry and dressing up, even though I love, love, love all that stuff. They are vehicles. It's the story that draws us here. Its power. Its hope. Its pathos. Its truth.

Resurrection is true, even though we can't gather. Resurrection is true in the face of all this, perhaps especially true in the face of all this. The story, needed as much as it ever has been.

And that story itself is a multi-dimensional, multi-emotional, multi-meaning narrative that brings into focus everything that is true about the human condition and true about God, the God we know in Jesus Christ, one of us and *not* one of us, the plumb line through whom and with whom we travel this life, including this COVID 19 chapter.

Each gospel tells the story just a bit differently. It's a Matthew year. Two Marys go to the tomb on that Sunday morning to care for the body. There is an earthquake. An angel descends and rolls back the stone from the grave. The angel to the women: "Do not be afraid." The angel tells the women to go tell the disciples, the men. They leave the tomb running, we are told, with "fear and great joy." Fear and great joy. On the way to meet the disciples they run into Jesus, who greets them warmly. "Do not be afraid," he encourages them, go and tell the others.

So much hope. So much joy. And so much fear. The angel entreats the women – obviously petrified – *to not be afraid*. With *fear and great joy*, great joy yes, but no small measure of fear, the women run to tell the disciples. And on the way, Jesus assures the women – who must not only be extraordinarily surprised but equally terrified – *do not be afraid*.

At Christmas we rightly sing to the little town of Bethlehem, where the "hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." But that might pale in comparison to the hope and fear, the joy and fear, in the town of Jerusalem, on Maundy Thursday and the night of betrayal, on Good Friday, the day of execution, even on Easter morning, the day of the empty tomb.

Think what they have gone through. Their leader has been executed, and they were complicit. They are now hiding because of their alliance with him. So much human fear even as those humans are told repeatedly *not* to be afraid.

What that means to me, at least, of all the many things that the empty tomb and the promise of resurrection and God's ultimate victory over death means, is that human fear persists. It just does. It is real and it is honest. The angel acknowledges it. Jesus acknowledges it. So must we.

This year, especially, is not the year to blithely pretend there is no fear, or any other emotion that is so fully human – anxiety, uncertainty, grief, sadness, disappointment. Resurrection does not magically erase that. Resurrection *does* receive it, transform it, not allow it to be the final word. But fear is real.

William Placher writes of Jesus that “this is the vulnerable God who can most be with us in our sufferings.” (*Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, page 109)

Here is what always seems to happen, and keeps happening. Jesus is ahead of the fear. When fear and the people bump into each other, Jesus is already there. It is true at his birth. It is true in his life. It is true in his death. It is true now. Jesus anticipates our fear and is already there to meet it head-on.

Frederick Dale Bruner, in his epic commentary on Matthew's gospel, writes that “The message of resurrection...cannot be heard where there is fear. Fear monopolizes attention and paralyzes response.” (Page 787) That is why the story continually invites us, encourages us, to not be afraid. Bruner continues: “Fear blocks good news...The gospel command against fear is not a rhetorical flourish; it is a command – and so a catalyst – for the right hearing of the gospel.” (Page 797)

Fear, even in the face of this command, persists. In a wonderful Easter sermon, the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes: “The empty grave, that strange and ambivalent sign, stands as a reminder that the life of Jesus is not ‘over...’ He is ‘with us.’ In every extremity, every horror and pain, Jesus is accessible as the one who continued to make God's loving presence wholly present in the depth of his own anguish and abandonment. There is a place for God now in all suffering, at the heart of suffering and even of death.” (*Ray of Darkness*, page 59)

That is true for whatever fear we face – emotional, spiritual, relational, medical. It is true for whatever communal or cultural or global fear we face – including a pandemic. Resurrection will not make the fear go away. People will die, are dying,

from this virus. In whatever ways we are socially isolating and all the rest, still an element of fear and anxiety lingers.

And yet.

Richard Rohr writes: “I, like many of you, am only a disciple of the poor man from Nazareth. He has made me content with mystery. He has made me less afraid of chaos. He has told me that control is not my task. (“Where the Gospel Leads Us”) It might take the execution of a leader, or a global pandemic, to remind us that control is not our task. Resurrection lifts that burden. When we meet Jesus, in fear, he is already ahead of us, to meet it head-on.

The poet Wendell Berry encouraged us to “practice resurrection.” We do that this year by acknowledging the fear, COVID 19 and all for which it serves as a surrogate – taking it seriously, and then moving – not around it, not ignoring it – but through it, to something new, to find the faith in our fear, to hard-wrought hope and joy.

Resurrection – the Jesus story ending up with a rolled away stone and empty tomb – tells us “do not be afraid.” We muster up every ounce of hope and joy we can find – and lean on others when we can’t – and say, even whisper, simply, and bravely – “Christ is risen, Christ is risen, Christ is risen.” Amen.