



## Live Like the Living

Matthew 28:1-10

A sermon by William M. Klein

Virtual Worship via ZOOM

12 April 2020

1 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you." 8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." (Mt. 28:1-10 NRSV)

1

On Sunday, the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary returned to the tomb to apply ointments and spices and to rewrap Jesus' body. As they walked to the cemetery, they wondered how they would deal with the massive stone that sealed Jesus' grave. Between them, they couldn't move the huge thing enough to slip inside.

When they arrived, they saw the stone was already rolled away...and sitting on the massive stone was an angel...just sitting there as if taking a work-break.

Matthew is the only gospel writer who tells us the angel was sitting on the stone. Apparently this solitary angel rolled away the huge stone that sealed the tomb. Then the impish angel sat down on it – transforming that stone of death into a resurrection pulpit.<sup>1</sup>

2

The women also saw the men who were assigned to guard the grave standing there like dead men. Apparently what the guards saw filled them with such fear they shook and became like standing stones. [It is worth noting that in the Old Testament "standing stones" were erected to denote God had been there. In a sense, then, these guards were like other standing stones in the Bible - put into a pile to proclaim a mighty act of God.]

Fear has the power to incapacitate us, doesn't it...to leave us like dead people...still living, but not really living.<sup>2</sup> Those guards became standing stones because they were "sore afraid." And I dare say I don't blame them. In fact, I would be suspicious of anyone who could have seen what those guards saw without shaking with fear.

Put yourselves in their sandals. What would you have thought as the earth shook under your feet...as an angel appeared out of thin air to roll the stone you were supposed to be guarding from in front of Jesus' tomb...and then as the angel hopped up on the massive stone to have a seat?

I wish I could have heard how those guards told their superiors and the chief priests what they had seen. I'd love to look into their eyes – to look into eyes that witnessed the whole amazing Easter scene. I'd love to hear what the guards had to say about the angel sitting there, legs crossed on the massive stone, chewing on a long blade of Spring grass.

We learn later that the chief priests paid the guards to keep quiet about what they'd seen. Fear, it seems, doesn't just have the power to make people stop in their tracks like dead men. It also has the power to make people do some foolish, devious, and even dangerous things.

### 3

When the angel spied the frightened women from his perch on the massive stone, he said, "Hey, don't be afraid." He was a Southern angel. He said, "Hey, don't be afraid."

Turns out the women were just as scared as the guards but with a very big difference. They stayed enough in the land of the living to hear what the angel had to say.

The current threat we are under certainly has the power to frighten us to death. And it is absolutely good and prudent and faithful for us to continue to worship remotely and to observe social distance until we are sure we cannot be of harm to one another.

What I have seen and heard tells me many people have chosen to react to the very real threat by being smart...but also by choosing not to shut down. I have been so heartened to hear about people being creative... gathering delightedly as we are today through any number of platforms... friends blending music from their homes through video...people calling one another more regularly...businesses continuing to pay their laid-off employees. We may still be frightened by what the coronavirus can do...but I believe and trust the Spirit of the living God is empowering us to choose life.

You see, when fears cause you to become like dead people you are likely to miss a message from God...whether it comes directly from God (which happens to some people) or through people or events (which is far more common). But if we choose to be fully alive, then angels may whisper in our ear.<sup>3</sup> You and I have a choice: to give ourselves over to our fears and become like dead men...or to let our fears draw us out of our preoccupation with ourselves, our feelings, or our circumstance into a world of wonder.<sup>4</sup>

### 4

The angel said, "Hey, don't be afraid. Jesus is not here. Resurrection has already happened. You can look for yourselves...but I can tell you, he's not there. He told you he would be raised and he has. Go tell the disciples the good news and tell them he will meet them in Galilee."

We don't know if the women had a peak into the tomb for themselves. Matthew does tell us the women ignored at least a portion of the angel's advice. The angel said, "Don't be afraid" – but they couldn't help it. They ran off shaking with fear. They didn't become like dead men like the guards...but they were quaking with fear.

Don't you expect they also went off laughing, singing, shouting, embracing – whatever you do when you're filled with great joy?<sup>5</sup> They ran off leaving that angel sitting on that stone. How long do you reckon the angel sat there? 24 hours? A week? A year? 2000 years? Do you expect that angel is sitting there still?

The women could not have gone far from the empty tomb when the risen Lord met them on the road. "Greetings," he said. Once they recognized him, they took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then what did Jesus say? "Don't be afraid."

Don't be afraid! It's a recurring theme. How could they not be afraid... considering what they'd seen with their own eyes the last three day?

Thoughtful as ever, the risen Lord said something like this to the two women: "You don't need those rags and spices anymore. As you see, I no longer have need of them. I am quite alive. Set what you brought with you aside and go tell the disciples to meet me in Galilee."

A task has a way of channeling confusion - of helping to get someone from point A to point B. The task Jesus gave the women allowed them to do something productive as they tried to make sense of their fear and joy. The task gave them space to try to appropriate something that didn't fit with what they knew about life and death.<sup>6</sup> They could run and tell the others what they had seen and heard - that Jesus was alive - that he had spoken to them - and that they now had something to do, too...i.e., go to Galilee where he would meet them.<sup>7</sup>

It is quite a story. It is a terrific story. When we hear the story with our heart and head...it is not just an abstract story, not just a "once-upon-a-time" story. It becomes a story that leaves us trembling, too. I'm not talking about fear of being harmed or of someone we love being harmed. Nor am I talking about fear that makes us want to become like dead people. I'm talking about fear that is more like awe...fear that makes us want to be something and to go do something.

Because of what happened that Easter morning God wants us to understand that life is a reality bigger than any of us supposed. Life is not simply about birth, paying taxes, and death. Life is not simply about avoiding the coronavirus...and the next existential threat that comes at us.

Life is also about something beyond sight and sound. It is about a reality beyond our ability to conjure and manipulate. Easter proclaims there is a reality stronger than death - and that reality is God and God's love.<sup>8</sup> Because Jesus lives, we shall live also...and so we can live even now in a completely different way.

At the heart of the resurrection is the disturbing and liberating truth that new life is always possible. It is a reality that merges fear with joy, isn't it? It's an odd breed of fear and joy that makes us giggle as we think of that silly angel sitting on the stone...the stone meant to entomb the man who was a threat to the people in power...the stone meant to silence the joyful hope of his followers...the stone meant to be a sign of death that was transformed by God into a pulpit from which news of Jesus' resurrection was proclaimed.

As you ponder all of this - as you try to make sense of what God did to this world and to you by raising his Son from the dead - let me give you a task. A task has a way of giving you something productive to do with awesome news.

Go from wherever you are today to live as if Jesus is raised from the dead...to live like the living! Amen.



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## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Lundblad, Barbara K. 2001. Transforming the Stone. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 150.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel, Lillian. 2013. When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough. E-book edition. NY: Jericho Books, loc. 634.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel, loc. 651.

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, Eugene Hoiland. 2006. Living the Resurrection: The Risen Christ in Everyday Life. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Lundblad, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Buchanan, John M. 2005. *Christian Century*. March 22 issue. Chicago: Christian Century Foundation, 3.

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 28:16. Luke and John tell us the women shared the good news with the disciples. Matthew does not. But it is clear the women did tell the disciples because they went to Galilee where they met Jesus on the mountain

<sup>8</sup> Buchanan, 3.