

Nathan Brown
"Handling Easter"
April 26, 2009
West Side Christian Church

Luke 24:36b-48

This morning, we find ourselves in the midst of Eastertide, the fifty days of the Christian calendar dedicated to celebrating and reflecting on the risen Christ. Not being with you the past few Sundays, I have been reading back over the lectionary readings, trying to find some common themes to connect to today's reading. Ironically, the only common notion I could find is this: Easter is a pretty scary thing! The empty tomb actually causes quite a bit of fear and doubt.

Reflect back with me for a moment. Remember the way that Mark ends his version of the Easter story? He writes, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

It's not just the empty tomb that is frightening. Apparently, when Easter happens and the resurrected Jesus makes a physical appearance, the experience also causes quite a bit of fear and doubt. I know Fred did not preach on this passage last Sunday, but the lectionary reading was on doubting Thomas. Jesus appears to his disciples and frightens them, but Thomas is absent. Therefore, Thomas does not believe. Thomas becomes the quintessential character of fear and doubt in all of scripture.

Then there is our reading this morning.... Once again, Jesus reveals himself to the disciples and Luke writes, "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Jesus says to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

Have you ever thought of Easter as being a terrifying event? Have you ever considered Easter to be an experience that might invoke feelings of fear and trembling? It certainly is a contradiction to what we experience on Easter morning, right?

In the sanctuaries of churches all over the world, trumpets blaze, choirs sing the hallelujah chorus, preachers shout with joy, "He is risen" and Christians leave church feeling full of hope and joy. Yet, the way that the Bible describes the reactions of those who experience the first Easter is actually similar to the way the Bible describes the reactions of those who experience the first Good Friday. It seems to be about fear, doubt, and dismay.

Some of you are thinking, "Well, of course they were afraid. They didn't know what was going on. The disciples expected Good Friday to be the end. The women at the tomb thought his body had been stolen. The only reaction they could have had to an empty tomb and an appearance of the resurrected Christ would have been fear and doubt.

Our reaction, as people of the church, should be different because we know what really happened.”

Yet, I wonder if each of us were to explore the true depths of our souls, we might not also, as people of the church today, find something disturbing about the Easter story. Isn't there something scary about resurrection? Don't we doubt the possibility of death being transformed into new life? Isn't there something startling about Jesus showing up in our midst?

Perhaps the greatest Easter moment for any parent is the birth of their children. This was certainly the case for Marion and me just four weeks ago. The joy of new life that one experiences in the form of a child is really indescribable. It's an Easter experience unlike any other.

On the other hand, it is just like every Easter experience in that it causes quite a bit of fear and trembling. Will the baby be okay? Will my wife be okay? Will we really be able to afford this?

And the question that every parent asks is the question that is at the heart of every Easter experience. It is a question that comes from fear and doubt: Will I be a good parent? Or, more broadly put: Will I really be able to handle this?

This is the question that makes Easter so scary. I think this is the question the women at the tomb ask. This is the question the disciples ask. This is the question you and I ask every time we encounter new life: Will we really be able to handle this?

When you take on a new vocation and start all over again, “Will I really be able to handle this?” When you start a new relationship after a break-up or a divorce, “Will I really be able to handle this?” When a loved one is raised to new life in heaven and you remain here on earth to carry on or even to start anew, “Will I really be able to handle this?” When you decide to retire, “Will I really be able to handle this?” When you take on a new ministry opportunity like becoming an Angel Food Host Site, “Will we really be able to handle this?”

The most frightening thing about Easter is the fact that the resurrected Christ is in our presence—is embodied in what we do as the church. Therefore, resurrection calls us to respond. New life requires action on our part. Transformation means responsibility unlike any other.

Whether it is caring for a new baby, a new job, a new relationship, or a new ministry, the most frightening thing about the resurrected Jesus in our midst is that we are called to become evidence of that resurrection. The Easter message is in our hands. With that responsibility, we cannot help but be a little fearful, a little doubtful. “Will we really be able to handle this?”

A recent televised news report told of two women who were 9/11 widows. Grateful for the outpouring of support they received, they started thinking about the women in Afghanistan who, when widowed, lose status in that society and therefore find their already difficult lives even harder. These two women raised money and formed a foundation called “Beyond the 11th” to support Afghani widows. They even made visits to Afghanistan to meet the widows they were helping.¹

I think about stories like this one and I am convinced, there is no question these women must have asked themselves, “Will we really be able to handle this?” Fear and doubt must have been their initial reaction to 9/11 and the tragedy that they experienced in losing their husbands. But the fear and doubt was not the end.

By the grace of God, they created an Easter story. These women turned death into new life. They took tragedy and brought forth from it a ministry to those who were suffering. The question, “Will we be able to handle this?” was not the end, but the beginning. Easter reminds us that fear is never the end. In fact, Easter gives us the answer, “Yes, we can handle this.”

At least, that is what Luke teaches us this morning. While the disciple’s initial reaction is fear and doubt, Jesus says to them, “Peace be with you.” Then he sits down and shares a meal with them, he opens their minds up to the scriptures, and by the end of this passage, Jesus has commissioned them to continue on his work saying to them, “You are witnesses of these things.” It seems the fear has already left them.

That is the Easter message--that in the midst of fear and doubt, in the midst of questioning whether or not we can handle newness and change, Christ appears to us, intrudes on us, startles us, and gives us the strength and faith to handle whatever life might bring or whatever we are being called to do.

I think we have all been a bit fearful of Easter in this church the last four years. Hiring a new minister meant new life. Hiring a young minister meant change. Implementing a Visioning Plan that calls every congregant to action means transformation. Being more present in our community means conversion. Welcoming new people into our midst means modification. Fear and doubt have certainly been part of the resurrection taking place here at West Side.

And I am not sure if Jesus really expects us not to fear or to doubt. I think ideally, he would have us do as he tells us in Matthew, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.” However, when push comes to shove, it seems to me that some doubt and fear are inevitable...and that’s okay.

I have experienced doubt and fear in my life, but never like that I experienced on Monday, March 23rd, the day we found out that Caroline had died. We went home that

¹ Blakely, Nancy R. “Pastoral Perspective-Third Sunday of Easter-Luke 24:36b-48.” *Feasting on the Word*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Pg. 428.

afternoon, overwhelmed with grief, overwhelmed by all who would be affected by her death, overwhelmed with preparing to say goodbye to a child at the same time we would be saying hello to another child. Will we really be able to handle this?

But then something startling happened----sympathy cards began overflowing in our mailbox, phone calls came by the dozens, text messages and e-mails flooded our inboxes, people came to visit in droves, food inundated our freezer. Fear and doubt gave way to faith.

In our grief and suffering, Jesus appeared to Marion and me, said "Peace be with you," opened up our minds to God's grace and love, broke bread and shared a meal with us, and even though we did not go to an Easter worship service this year, Easter took place in our hearts and in our home.

You see, whether you know it or not, you embodied the resurrected Christ. You took the responsibility of bringing to us the Easter message we needed to hear and to see. You carried on in ministry during one of the busiest times in the life of the church. Christ empowered you to overcome your own fear and doubt. With the resurrected Christ in our midst, we can handle anything.

It is easy to say to someone, "there is nothing to be afraid of" and a whole lot more difficult to live without any fear. No matter how many times we might read the passage from Matthew in which Jesus says, "Do not worry about tomorrow..." some form of doubt and fear will always be present in our lives. Fear of cancer, fear of loneliness, fear of terrorists, fear of death. If we are going to be Easter people, I am not sure it is possible to be completely rid of fear.

However, because of my own personal journey through Holy Week and Eastertide this year, I am convinced, like never before, that it is possible to overcome your fears and to do whatever it is that God is calling you to do.

Yes, there is something scary about Easter. Yes, there is something frightening about death being transformed into new life. And, Yes, with the resurrected Christ in our midst, we can handle it.

Amen.