



The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead.’”Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee.”

[Matthew 28:5-7, 10]



Many years ago Celia Caldwell was leading Children’s Church at the congregation I served in Dallas. It was Easter and as expected there was an overflow crowd in the children’s chapel. Celia was hard pressed to keep the lesson going.

She finally tried a different track: “What is Easter?” Hands went up ~ lots of answers involving rabbits, decorating eggs, candy, new clothes and pretty hats. Christopher Reed, age four was beside himself, jumping up and down, stretching his hand as high as he could. Finally in frustration he just couldn’t hold it any longer:

“Mrs. Caldwell!! Jesus is alive!”



Isn't that the point ~ the real point of Easter Day. It's easy to see why most of the children couldn't come up the answer we know is correct. Haven't we adults modeled behaviors more focused on the peripherals than the core. We see all these cultural accretions which have been added over the centuries, the Easter egg hunts, the fluffy bunnies, the new clothes. The word Easter itself comes from a festival of pagan origin to celebrate the rites of spring. As important a part of our celebration of new life offered through Jesus, as important as these have become, none of these should ever obscure the main event.

“Mrs. Caldwell!! Jesus is alive!”

Out of the mouth of babes ~ the prophet Isaiah is right: “a little child shall lead” us ~ into the truth about Easter.



Mary was approaching the tomb. She sees the stone rolled away. An angel tells her to **“come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples.”** She rushes off and finally finds the disciples locked in a room with the door bolted.

- “I’ve got good news and bad news” she says. “Good news is I found the tomb empty. Jesus is alive.”

- “What’s the bad news,” Peter asks.

- “Bad news is Jesus is looking to find out where all you guys were Friday night.”

That is funny of course, but does also illustrates a deep but often overlooked truth ~ Easter Sunday began in fear and fear is where we must begin if we are to fully comprehend the Easter Good News.

This is where the Easter story always begins – indeed, must begin if it is really to be Easter and not merely some pagan and sentimental rite of spring.





So, when have you been really afraid? Not merely nervous, surprised or startled but deeply afraid, shaken to your core, fear unto death even, for yourself or someone you love?¹

I know that fear in my own life. It was when we were called into Kathleen's doctor's office and the

Internist came in with a grave expression. Scans have revealed.....and it fades out at that point. I can't remember much after that. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't stand up, I couldn't move. I could only weep tears of rage and grief – panic with fear and trembling. With cancer the mourning process often begins on that fearful day and the actual time of death should it come represents just as often a midway point in grief.

When have you been really afraid – afraid unto death? That is precisely where the story of Easter begins. Easter begins with the twelve cowering in hiding, in fear for their lives. Mary of Magdala is no less fearful I suspect, but drained by weeping until there are no tears left, desire to perform last rites must have overpowered her fear filled heart. She crept as quietly as she could to the tomb along with another disciple named Mary.

Then there is earthquake, lightning and an angel in white descends. The guards are paralyzed at the fearsome appearance of the angel. What's the first thing the angel says to the two Mary's?

- "Do not be afraid."

"Do not be afraid?" How could you not be cowering in fear after all that has transpired over the last days? But we are well advised to obey any angel's directive as they are the messengers from God.



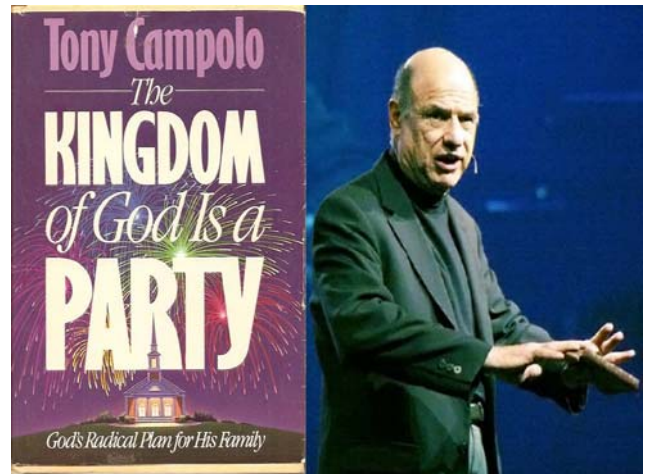
Easter begins in fear, fear for uncounted reasons, reasonable and rational fears, irrational and unreasonable fears. But then it moves to offer an end to fear itself, and the first glimmer of anticipation that something has changed. Something enormous – something which has never happened before has occurred. “Jesus is alive.” Hope against hope. Impossible! But true nevertheless.

Hope grows to conviction and conviction grows to faith and faith grows to action. The rhythm of Easter is to move out of the “house of fear” into the “house of love” [to use the terms of Henri Nouwen].²

“Do not be afraid. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.”

We practice what we preach nearly every day. The idea behind every Christian funeral is that we move from the house of fear into the house of love, God’s overwhelming, white hot love. In every Christian funeral we bear witness to the resurrection.

Tony Campolo, Evangelical writer and scholar, in his *The Kingdom of God is a Party*, a great book by the way, Campolo tells of a funeral he attended many years ago at his home church, Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia. Toni Campolo is white but his home congregation is predominately black. When he was young he attended the funeral of Clarence, a college friend who had been killed in a subway accident. The church was filled with friends and family overcome with grief.³



The pastor expounded on the scriptural promise of resurrection. He spoke special words of comfort directly to the family. He spoke movingly and poignantly of Clarence’s life in a beautiful litany of memories of things Clarence had done for others. How he had served without thought of reward.

Then he addressed the corpse in the coffin:

“Well, Clarence that’s it. I’ve got nothing else to say except this: Good night, Clarence. Good Night!” And with that he slammed down the lid of the casket as stunned silence fell over the congregation.

Then a beautiful smile slowly lit up the pastor’s face and he shouted, “and I know that God is going to give Clarence a good morning!”

With that the choir rose to its feet and started singing “On that great getting’ up morning we shall rise, we shall rise!” All of us in the congregation rose to our feet and started singing it with them. There was clapping and crying. But they were tears of laughter.

Everywhere I looked, there were smiles amidst the tears. Celebration had broken out in the face of death. Something of the party that is to come had broken into that church. A foretaste of the joy that will one day be shared by us all was temporarily ours, a glimpse of the party prepared for all of those who die in Christ was had, and death had been swallowed up in victory.⁴

“Where, O Death, is your victory!?
Where, O Death, is your sting!?”

Now that is a witness to the resurrection. Contrast that with our usual funeral atmosphere which is all sadness.

The angel said: “Do not be afraid. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.” Then what did the angel say? Our old, old friend, the formula we have

seen before over and over again, the formula for what Jesus has told us to do, indeed only all that God wants us to do: **“Come & See ~ Go & Tell.”** Simple enough – simple enough for even children to grasp

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[Matthew 28:5-7, 10]

**COME
AND SEE**

*“Come, see **the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead.’”***



Jesus later reiterates to Mary and Mary: ***“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”***

What is this Good News we are to tell across the earth?

“Mrs. Caldwell!! Jesus is alive!”

“Peter!! Jesus is alive!”

“Clarence!! Jesus is alive!”

“Everyone!! Jesus is alive!”



We practice what we preach most every day. Henri Nouwen asks: “How can we live in the midst of a world marked by fear, hatred and violence,” the world that murdered our Jesus, without being “destroyed by it?” The Easter message is that even at the times of our greatest fear and need, if we listen to the message of the angel, “Do not be afraid, we will be led in the dance from fear and trembling to joy and freedom.”⁵

“Do not be afraid!”

- ❖ “Do not be afraid of life – of living life for eternity.”
- ❖ “Do not be afraid of the big ‘D’ word – death, the final, greatest fear.”
- ❖ “Do not be afraid of the big ‘C’ word – cancer.”

What have we to fear?

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” [Romans 8:38-39]

¹ *Lectionary Homiletics*, 3/27/2005, pp. 66-7

² *Ibid*, p. 67

³ Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God is a Party* (Word: 1990), p129.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 129-30.

⁵ *Lectionary Homiletics*, 3/27/2005, p. 67