

Sermon on Luke 24:1-12
Easter Sunday, April 21 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

“Alleluia! Christ is Risen!” He is risen indeed! Alleluia! We shout these words as a cry of hope, for the belief we have in life in the face of death, that one person – named Jesus – has gone before us to defeat our common enemy, death!

As we read the Easter gospel today, a few words stood out to me, about the women who came early in the morning to Jesus’ tomb (when the male disciples hid out, for fear of the authorities). They were *perplexed* when they found the heavy stone was rolled away. They were *terrified* when two men in dazzling clothes appeared, and told them Jesus was not there, just as he had told them. Then the women *remembered Jesus’ words*, and so they returned and *told the others* what had occurred. But when the men heard the women’s words *it seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them*. Perhaps they tried to “mansplain” to the women what they had seen, which seemed impossible to them. But Peter checked it out, going to the tomb to see things as the women had told them, *and he was amazed at what had happened.*”

Perplexed. Terrified. There was a lot to be afraid of in those days, with a ruthless Roman army occupying their land, and authorities searching for any possible threats. The disciples were afraid for their lives – they might be taken like Jesus had been, arrested, detained, even executed. All because Jesus had challenged the status quo with the promises of God to have mercy, and give life to everyone, through faith!

So it is today among us. There are so many things we have to fear these days.....The conflict in politics and corruption that makes us fear for our republic. We witness the separation of children from their parents at the southern border – as they come to us seeking safety and asylum because of fear of violence by gangs in their home countries like Guatemala. They even risk death in the desert, to make life safe for their children. But they find more fear and threats at *our* border, and many find themselves detained, deported, and worst of all, their children and babies taken from their mother’s arms. There is so much fear.

Then there are fires burning homes and cities in California, or floods caused by rain and melting snow in the Midwest. Gun violence in schools, threatening our children and their teachers, and Congress appears helpless. People fear the rising medical costs that cause our loved ones to lose the security of their health, and the illnesses, accidents, and expensive procedures that threaten health and safety.

In the face of all of these fears, real or imagined, we have the scriptures calling you and me to *have faith, not fear*. Easter is the feast day that gives us

reason to believe in this God of mercy and hope, who has created us, and promises to be with us in the midst of our trials. Today we hear about the God who has the power not only to *give* us life, but to give life again even *after we have died*. Can you believe it? This is the leap of faith Easter calls you and me to take, because in the end, we have nothing else. Jesus invites you and me to have the courage of faith, to overcome our many fears and follow him in the path that leads to life.

Now we often hear about *courage* – in books like John F. Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage*, which describe persons who act with great courage despite great challenges. Now “Courage” is not the absence of fear – for then our bold actions would merely be foolish recklessness, without awareness of the risk. Anyone can act foolishly. But real courage is the faith - the ability - to live boldly in the face of fear – when we are fully aware of what we are afraid of and facing it. It’s like soldiers in wartime who are deathly afraid, but still follow orders and do their duty. Some do very courageous things – but wet their pants at the same time, because they know the risk.

Fear is real, because as we grow up, we learn about the consequences for our actions, and the risks we face just by getting up in the morning, or crossing the street. For if one thing unites us as human beings, of any race, culture, nation or religion, it is that we are born, we die, and we live our lives facing fear at the same time we are seeking hope, joy, and love. And only faith, and love, can save us.

The Passion story of Jesus’ crucifixion, death and resurrection is all about this – but ends unexpectedly, with a twist. Jesus was born, and raised by his parents as a gifted child with all kinds of hope and promise. When he became an adult, he scared his family and amazed the people he met, with his wisdom about God and human relations, and his miracles, signs and wonders. He fed thousands at a time by just getting his followers to share, cast out demons that most people feared and avoided, and forgave persons whom most simply rejected or cast out. But then he went too far for some, by challenging the religious authorities with their hypocrisy, and crossing the boundaries to bring God’s healing and grace to women, to Gentiles, to those considered untouchable outcasts, to make them part of God’s kingdom, too. That was just too much to some, like welcoming migrants who cross our borders, when we don’t understand why they come, and are unwilling to share the welcome that our grandparents and ancestors received.

Jesus is the model for those who have come after him, in generation after generation, by challenging the prejudices of his people and offering a new way of love, treating your neighbor as well as you’d want your own family and loved ones to be treated. Generations after him, people of faith have shared their food and their wealth with others, taken homeless poor families into their homes and churches, even risked lives and reputations to follow Jesus’ commandment to love. We have given shelter and protection to undocumented immigrants whom the

authorities would rather detain and deport. And in doing so, we share hope. People of faith, and those of just plain good will, go to border towns to hand out clothing and feed hungry asylum seekers dropped off by the Border Patrol because they don't have the time or the capacity to give shelter or a decent meal.

Sometimes it doesn't make much logical sense, what we may do out of faith, when we follow the Master. You know, Jesus' own family thought he might have been crazy, either because of the radical way of love he preached or the way he lived it out. Like when he stopped what he was doing and went out of his way to sit with a woman from Samaria at a well, to listen to her story and not just "preach" to her, but give her hope for the future. Faith sometimes seems more like craziness to others. But if faith were certain, it wouldn't be faith – and maybe everyone would have it. But we don't all live by faith, that much is certain.

So we continue to live with fear, at the same time we are seeking more faith and trust in God. Many of us have gone through some difficult days, lost loved ones, faced down some fears to keep on going. Some of you are recovering from surgery, facing a medical procedure, or you or a loved one are looking ahead to surgery, declining health, or difficult decisions for your family. I know it is happening for many of you right now, and it weighs on your mind. Every person here probably has something that is causing concern, worry or fear – if not health, then money, or a job, or a relationship.

My family was surprised this past week with our own challenges and fears – when Kim's father, Lieng, suffered a major heart attack. We are not sure when it happened, but he was hospitalized last Thursday, and he is in Regions intensive care today. His prognosis is not good, and returning to full health is not a realistic hope – at the age of 98. But the family has been gathering from Minnesota, Florida, and California – daughters and sons-in-law, many grandchildren. So we are looking to be together with him as family for as long as we can to celebrate Easter as family, knowing that the time is short to do this. So as I have been here with you for the Sacred Three Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil, my family has been gathered in the critical care unit. But we are strengthened by the hope of God's promises and prayer with Lieng's pastor Joy from Christ on Capitol Hill, and our own prayers of faith – just as you are when you go through a similar experience.

So we are afraid – like all human beings, we have our fears of death that is coming soon to our family, and the separation and loss we will experience soon from Kim's beloved father, my children's beloved "Gong". But we are afraid at the same time we have hope. So I close with a story of hope, which goes with the gospel, to temper the fear of these days. As my children and nephews gathered with us in sadness in the hospital room on Thursday, an overcast, dreary day, all of a sudden we looked outside through the window. And there, over the St. Paul

skyline to the east, was a giant rainbow in the sky. We looked to the right, and there was Gong, breathing through a ventilator in his bed. We looked to the left, and there was this rainbow, which lasted almost 10 minutes. I thought of the promises of scripture attached to the rainbow and the promise of life which God gives. I thought of the aftermath of the great flood, when Noah built an altar and worshiped God with his family, in thankfulness for their survival. Now, a rainbow won't save anybody. But it is a reminder of our hope. This rainbow came as a promise of life from God, and that even though there is suffering and death among us today, we have God's promise that this is not the end, that there is hope to come, there is life forever, through faith.

The sign for all of us is the good news of the women, who came to Jesus' tomb on that first Easter morning despite their sadness and fear, who then saw that Jesus was not there. He had risen! The same message comes to you and me today – whatever our fears, and the death that surrounds us! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed ! There is life forever, through faith ! Happy Easter! Amen.

Alleluia! God you hear our prayers and bring healing. Thank you for hearing all the prayers for Landen, the five-year-old thrown from a balcony at the Mall of America, who now shows signs of recovery. We rejoice that the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, France, was not destroyed by fire, and that restoration seems possible. And thank you for all those who have prayed for and donated funds to rebuild churches in Louisiana that were burned because of one man's hatred for African Americans. May we all overcome our prejudices and hatreds, and learn to reconcile and love one another. Hear us, O God.