

March 23, 2008. Easter Service
Matthew 28:1-10
"Fear and Joy"
Pastor Mary Robinson-Mohr

"They left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy...." This is how Matthew describes the women running from a graveyard to tell the disciples that Jesus is no longer a prisoner of death. With fear and great joy.

We don't normally put those two emotions together, do we? Fear seems to have nothing to do with joy, and often drains all the joy out of living. Joy seems to be something only fearless and carefree people could have. What is this mix of feeling within these women?

Think of how you have felt before you ventured forth into something new. One of my nephews stayed with us the night before his wedding. He wasn't his normal laid-back self. When I first saw him on the day of the wedding, I said, "It's a great day today, isn't it?" He had a distracted, far away look in his eye, the look of a genuine stupor, the look I have seen in the eyes of many grooms. His face was rather pale. "What?" he asked, as if I had interrupted him from a trance. Then, before I could repeat myself, he went on to say, "Yes, it's a great day." The color in his face came back, and he smiled warmly. When he left to be an early groom for his wedding, I gave him a big hug, and said he'd be a great groom. He went out the door, stepping out into the biggest adventure of his life. Then about 30 seconds later, he came back. "I need another hug," he said. He went to his wedding with a degree of fear, but also great joy.

That seems to be pretty normal. Both Randy and I confessed to being fearful but also joyful before our wedding. One gives up familiar living before a marriage. Relationships with friends are modified as a spouse takes priority for free time. Decision-making with a spouse takes priority over decision-making with parents. Choices about furnishings, house colors, TV shows, who gets to control the remote, what kind of gravy is the best to have with Thanksgiving dinner, and all those things now have to be negotiated. And then, what if the marriage doesn't work out? There is a lot to fear when one goes into a marriage. But there is also much joy. You get to be with the most amazing person that you have met. You find ways to make decisions together, and instead of feeling as if half of your input had to be cut off or held back, the outcome of the decision turns out to be something much bigger and better than either of you could have done on your own. You discover the gift of companionship through all the ups and downs of life. You find that teamwork can lead your solo ideas to grow and take flight. The joy overrides the fear.

There is always a certain amount of risk whenever fear is to be overcome by joy. When I first entered seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, I had lots of butterflies in my stomach. What was I doing in graduate school, anyway? Why had I come clear across

the continent to study, so far from everyone and everything I knew? So many of the other students seemed to have their act together, and I wasn't even sure what my "act" would be. Some of the professors seemed to delight in ridiculing students that didn't measure up, too. That didn't help at all! Then one day, one of the older students said to me, "Oh, quit worrying. When you come here, you spend your first six months wondering what you are doing here, and then you spend the next six months wondering what everybody else is doing here!"

Each and every one of you knows about stepping out to take risks in spite of fears. You have had to start a new job, or start a new marriage, or move to a new place. Some of you have had to rediscover who you are in life, and that has its risks and fears. Some of you have had to make medical decisions for yourself or a family member, and those decisions never come with guarantees.

One does not have to leave the known and the safe. One can be guided through life by fear. One can avoid any leaps of faith in order to avoid smacking into fear. One can stay with the familiar. One can avoid fear at all costs. But to do so does not move one to the joy that can be grasped. Such perceived safety paradoxically leaves one paralyzed by the chance of fear. It leaves one limited, restricted, living in self-deception, and pretty frustrated. It does not take a chance to embrace the joy that is possible.

So the women ran from the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter morning full of fear and great joy. What was there to fear? Well, I think some of their fear is pretty obvious. They had gone to a cemetery to perform final rituals for the body of Jesus. When they arrived, the cemetery was anything but quiet! The earth shook, the tomb door rolled away, and a bright, flashy, and unearthly angel sat on the tombstone! Guards finishing up their night watch fainted! Humph! A lot of help they would be in a crisis!

Then the angel told them something that seemed unbelievable. Jesus was dead but is now alive, and he's on his way back to Galilee to meet everybody!

How easy it would be for the women to let fear guide their response. "Please, people will never rise from the dead, and I saw Jesus die with my own eyes. I will not let myself be hurt by entertaining some false hope that he might be alive! I must believe he is dead." Or perhaps they could have gone this way: "Well, maybe this is true on some level, but I can't live as if it is true. I certainly can't tell anybody! They'd think I was crazy! Whatever I believe inwardly, I must outwardly act as if Jesus is dead and buried in this tomb!"

But that isn't how the women reacted. In spite of their fears, in spite of having a horrible and disorienting fright in the cemetery, a great joy welled up within them, and they knew that they had to let that joy have the last word on this.

Wait! What if Jesus is alive? Oh, now the fears start to talk again. If Jesus is alive, we can't just go back to fishing or weaving or whatever we used to do back at home in Galilee. Life may not be the same. We may need to be on the road a lot, telling everybody what has happened. We may be called insane, or they may label us as heretics and punish us. Jesus was just crucified, so what might happen to me if I insist that he is alive?

One could understand if the women and the disciples just rolled the tomb door shut again. They could have said, "This business of new life and victory over death is going to make a shambles of my sheltered and protected life. We can't risk all of the uproar that would come with a Jesus that was dead but then came alive."

But that is not what they did. Oh, they ran with fear all right, and who could blame them? But they also ran with great joy. They ran with great joy because that familiar and sheltered former life also held a lot of pain. They remembered the days before they met Jesus, how as women and working people, they were never quite good enough to be deemed righteous and worthy of much. Why, the average man wouldn't even talk to a woman unless he wanted something from her. But Jesus had looked all of them straight in the eye, and talked to them about heavenly things. What fresh air he had brought to their strictly stratified world! They remembered how jaded they had been before Jesus urged them to reach out to people in need of healing, in need of companionship, in need of food and clothing. Now they had felt truly and beautifully and compassionately human, and they had caught a glimpse of how God's love could make all things new. They remembered how Jesus had challenged the idiotic side of leaders, how he had stood up for people crushed by obsolete laws and loopholes, and how he had warned people consumed by their wealth to open their eyes and find true meaning in life. They remembered how removed and capricious and unfeeling God had seemed to them before Jesus had taught them otherwise, and now they could pray to God directly and intimately, even calling God "Daddy," certain that they were loved by God.

Yes, they ran with fear. They remembered how the life of Jesus had made all things new. They had felt unspeakable anguish when they had seen him cast aside and beaten and executed. All of their hope had died on that cross with Jesus. But now, they could dare to hope that Jesus could never be contained by death! Jesus was alive! Hope was alive! Great joy was before them, ready to be embraced! They ran with fear and great joy, knowing that the ministry of Jesus and the presence of Jesus was still alive, yes, was even ready to grow into something bigger!

How many people do you know that live as if all hope is shut up tight in a tomb? How many people do you know that let fear and hopelessness guide their lives? Are you one of those people?

I don't know about you, but I see a lot of people living as if hope is buried in a grave. I see a lot of people who seem to think that violence will bring peace, and they can't see beyond their own fear to reason out any way to build allies instead of enemies. They are running pretty wild and loose with fear, but I don't see any joy or hope on their horizon. I see a lot of people pursuing material wealth, yuppie trophies, if you will. Where does it all end, besides an already overflowing landfill? And where is the joy in a life that must fill its emptiness and its voids with stuff instead of compassion?

And I see a lot of people restless with a need to find leaders that will care about the people – all the people – that they lead, leaders that will guarantee that the minds and the tummies of our children are filled with good things that will allow them to grow into productive and self-reliant adults. Where are those leaders that will allow communities to nurture the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, whether it is here in Whatcom County or in the streets of Mosul, Iraq, or in Darfur? Will fear guide these restless ones to choose leaders that speak of armed conflicts to seize what they need, or will the prospect of joy allow them to see a vision of what a servant-leader after the manner of Jesus Christ can bring?

There are tons of people out there that need to know that hope is not shut up in a tomb. Jesus has burst open the tomb door, and Jesus lives! Because of that, our fears and our own dead ends can be led to joy. We can live as people who have every reason to hold on to hope! Jesus suffered and died in a manner that contained all manner of betrayal and corruption and maliciousness that human hands could create. And Jesus was not defeated by that! Not at all! Jesus overcame every manner of sin and despair that confronts humanity. Indeed, we too can run our course of life with a healthy fear, but with great joy as the last word. God is good indeed! Amen.