

Old Testament lesson – Deuteronomy 30:15-20
New Testament lesson – Matthew 28:1-10

“Fear and Joy”

If you’ve ever known a person who has a problem with anger, you might have heard someone tell them they need to control their anger. But anger is an emotion, and long ago I heard someone point out that people can not control their emotions. Our emotions are internal responses to certain stimuli, and often we are simply not able to control those inner responses, those feelings that automatically arise in a particular area of our brain called the amygdala. It works faster than the thinking part of our brain, and we sometimes respond to emotion faster than we might like.

Often, however, it takes us a while to respond physically or verbally, and that delay is crucial. That’s because while we can not control what we feel, we can control much of our response to it.

I learned something else that also helped me understand anger. Anger is a secondary emotion. That is, it is always triggered by another emotion: fear, frustration, hurt, or injustice. When you recognize one of those happening, you can often act to head off the anger, or at least channel it appropriately.

One of those primary emotions that triggers anger is fear. It was very helpful as a parent to realize that if one of our sons was out late, the anger that was building up was due to fear – fear that something had happened, or that he might be doing something he shouldn’t. Sometimes that helped defuse my anger. Sometimes.

Fear of course, is famous for causing that “fight-or-flight” response. If you hear or read stories of combat veterans, it is extremely unusual to hear one say he was not afraid. People who do heroic things overcome fear; they don’t lack fear. They may not feel it during their heroic actions, but they probably felt it intensely just before that action.

Fear plays a role in our NT lesson today on this Easter morning. It’s not normally one of the things we associate with this happy day, but as I so often do, I will encourage you to imagine the

situation in which those women found themselves.

Near the end of the day before the sabbath, they had watched Jesus being crucified. He died, and his body was laid in a newly-hewn tomb belonging to a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph is mentioned in all four gospels, but we have to combine them to have a complete picture of the man. He was a wealthy member of the council of elders, and he was also a disciple of Jesus. BUT – he was a *secret* disciple, because he did not want the rest of the council to know.

So he had Jesus’ dead body buried in his tomb which had been carved out of the rock for Joseph. His friends were astonished. “Why would you do that, Joseph? Why would you give up your own tomb to this rabble-rouser?” “Well,” said Joseph, “he said he would have it back to me in a few days.”

Well, that’s how the old joke goes, anyway. But Joseph did not really know that, and neither did the women. The women mentioned in Matthew’s account were both named Mary: Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph. In Matthew 13:55, Mathew names James and Joseph as brothers of Jesus. So it might have been Mary the mother of Jesus whom Matthew is talking about here. They believe Jesus is dead, buried in the tomb.

On Friday, there had not been adequate time before the Sabbath to prepare Jesus properly for burial, so the women were taking spices with which to anoint him. Mark and Luke both report that. But these women had seen the great stone rolled in front of the tomb to close it. Mark’s account says they are concerned about that: they wondered who would roll it away for them.

As it turned out, they need not have worried. When they arrived at the tomb, they saw the stone rolled away, and an angel sat on it and addressed them. This account is slightly different from the other three gospels, in which they find

the tomb already opened. But Matthew's account answers the question the women asked in Mark's version: Who will roll the stone away for us?

But now they have another problem. There is an angel. If this is Mary the mother of Jesus, it has been 30+ years since she last talked with an angel, and this one starts the same way: "Do not be afraid." He says that only to the women. The guards had fainted; no point in telling them not to be afraid. But even if they had not fainted, the angel might not have told them not to be afraid. In the presence of God or his messenger, some people have good reason to be terrified.

To the women, however, the angel says, don't be afraid. For them, this instruction has a double meaning. First, don't be afraid of the angel. Like the Blues Brothers, he's on a mission from God. The tomb is empty, but he came to roll back the stone for the women so they could see the empty tomb. It is also his job to give a partial explanation why it's empty – Jesus is alive. "He has risen, *as he said*." Jesus had told his disciples this would happen, but the message never sank in. It would sink in soon enough, but not just yet.

No doubt the women were also afraid of the Jewish and Roman authorities. I don't know how likely it was that they would have crucified the women, but the Jewish leaders had once brought to Jesus a woman caught in adultery, suggesting she should be stoned to death.

Things were different now, and the angel knew that. Even if the authorities had been willing to execute these women, death had now lost its grip of fear on the human race. No longer was it to be feared as the end of life.

He tells the women to go tell the disciples that Jesus is raised from the dead, and he's going to meet them in Galilee. So the women departed in *fear and great joy*. They were still afraid. They could not stop being afraid. But why were they afraid? Why had they not stopped being afraid when the angel told them not to be afraid? That instruction seemed to work for Mary the first time, 30+ years ago. Maybe it helped that she was younger then, but I don't think that was it.

This had never happened before. Oh, Jesus had raised some other people from the dead. That had happened in the OT as well. But not like this. There had always been a prophet or someone like Jesus who was alive to work the miracle, to act as God's conduit. This resurrection of Jesus just – happened. And then he disappeared from the tomb, a rock tomb with a giant stone sealing it. He was on his way to Galilee nearly 80 miles away. This was power unlike any they had ever encountered,

I am a big fan of nuclear power. It is clean and safe. I have visited a nuclear power plant. I have seen the blue glow of Cherenkov radiation in the water of a nuclear research reactor. But I would be terrified of being exposed to the unshielded core of a nuclear reactor. That would obviously be fatal, and very painfully so.

I think the situation of these women was something like that. They had seen Jesus heal sick, blind and lame people, do miracles, cast out evil spirits, and even raise people from the dead. But somehow, this was different. In modern terms, this was a game-changer. And it was frightening. There was power at work here that the women had never before been exposed to.

And yet they could also not help feeling joyful. This was the best news ever. The very thing that caused them fear, the unlimited power of the living God, had brought about the most unexpected turn of events in the history of the world, even up to our present day. Jesus, whom they believed was God's Messiah, God's Anointed One, did not do what everyone had hoped and expected; he did something far better. And so now, they did what the angel told them to do. Well, some of what he told them to do.

And why not? This was obviously an angel, a personal messenger directly from God. When you are confronted with instructions directly from God, it is a good idea to follow those instructions. So they left to tell the others. But they were still afraid; afraid of this power, and perhaps still afraid of the Roman and Jewish authorities.

As they went, they met Jesus. And he told them again, “Do not be afraid.” Matthew does not tell us that after this they were no longer afraid. But does he need to? Jesus was raised from the dead. They had seen him die. The women had stayed near the cross and *watched him die*. They heard his last words, watched him as he breathed his last breath. They saw Joseph wrap his body. They saw his dead body laid in the tomb. They saw the great stone rolled into place to seal the tomb.

And now, here he was, meeting them on the way to tell the others, greeting them, letting them take hold of his warm, solid, living feet; not cold like a corpse, not insubstantial like a spirit or ghost. He was living flesh and blood, and he told them again, “Do not be afraid.”

I believe that at this point, that instruction finally took hold of them. At this point, the joy overcame the fear and banished it. Jesus was alive; there could be absolutely no doubt. The living, resurrected Christ cast out the last vestiges of fear still loitering about in their minds and hearts.

Our OT lesson seems quite different. It is part of a rather long section of the book of Deuteronomy in which Moses lays out a harsh choice for the people of Israel. As they are about to enter the Promised Land, Moses calls them together to renew the covenant. He describes for them the blessings they will experience if they will obey the commandments of God. Life would not be easy by our standards, but it would be a very good life, filled with blessings and abundance from God.

He also describes for them the curses they will experience if they disobey God and go off to worship and serve other gods. The curses are quite severe.

This passage was not quite the final farewell from Moses to Israel, but here he summarized the choice they had before them on that day. In fact, it was the choice they would face every single day in their new homeland. It was a choice between blessing and curse, a choice between

life and death. Choose to obey God, and you choose blessing and life. Choose to disobey God, and you choose curse and death.

It seems simple. It seems like it should be an easy choice. But apparently it is not easy. The Israelites frequently made the wrong choice, and others who know of this choice – namely, Christians – also make the wrong choice much too frequently. And if it seems like I am pointing my finger at anyone, please know that I am aware there are three fingers pointing back at me. As Paul wrote, we “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*”

For us today, there is perhaps a new choice, similar to the choice described by Moses, illustrated in the women at the tomb. Our choice is between fear and joy.

On the one hand, the lives of many Christians are characterized by paralyzing fear. I don’t mean the obvious kinds of fear like snakes and spiders, or of illness or a bad harvest, or even death. The fears that paralyze Christians are more subtle and the paralysis is not apparent. Genesis 3:1, the beginning of the story of Adam and Eve sinning in the garden, says this: “*Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made.*” The serpent, of course, was the devil, and he is still very subtle in the way he draws us away from God. Fear is one of his greatest weapons, and he uses it with very effective subtlety.

One of the most common fears we have in our culture is the fear of wasting time. And by that I don’t mean that people want to be working all the time. I don’t mean that people are opposed to relaxing and having fun.

What I mean is that people have very definite ideas of what wasting time is and is not. And for many people, Christian things, spiritual activities, are wasting time. I have suggested a few times the idea of men in the church meeting together for prayer during the week. I usually receive a response that makes me think it sounds like a waste of time; there is too much work to be done to waste time on prayer. It is a response in

facial expressions, not in words. Psalm 127:1 says, “*Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.*” If you dedicate some time to God in prayer, your work will be blessed in new ways that will amaze you.

I can say the same thing about Sunday mornings. I know Joel frequently talks about the statistics of church attendance in America and how they are lower than they were years ago. The reason is seldom stated in these terms, but it is because people are afraid of wasting time. Either they don’t believe in God or in Jesus or they are just afraid that time spent in worship on their day off is wasted time.

Good Friday services are not well-attended in most churches. We had a decent attendance here Friday night, but nothing like Easter services. Maundy Thursday services are even lower. Why is that? Are they a waste of time? I think it’s partly that fear. But those two services bring to the surface an even greater fear: the fear of death. And that is tied in with the fear of wasting time. Live as much as you can before you die. Do enjoyable things, like sleeping in and watching TV or going away for the weekend.

Maundy Thursday and Good Friday remind us of the great love God has for us. He sent his Son to die, to die in a most horrible way, in order to win us back. Is it really a waste of time to be here or somewhere else in worship for an hour or so every Sunday? Christ suffered and died for us and then he was raised from the dead to assure us that we are forgiven for our sins and we can have

eternal life with him. Does that not warrant an hour of worship each week? Is it really a waste of time to pray with others with whom we are joined in the fellowship of Christ’s Church?

When the women left the empty tomb, they were experiencing fear and great joy. That great joy is the other choice God offers us on this Resurrection Day. It is the joy we experience when we truly realize that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. Somehow, it must move from a story we know in our heads to a living reality in our hearts. Sometimes, that is a longer journey than you might think.

But when it truly happens, you will have a different idea about how time is wasted and how it is well-spent. Allow the reality of the resurrection to really sink in. Encounter the living, resurrected Jesus Christ, and listen when he says, “Do not be afraid.”

Stop being afraid of wasting time in prayer or worship. There is no better way to spend time. Stop being afraid of death. Jesus has defeated it. Death is no longer the end of life. That’s what this day means to us who believe and follow Jesus Christ.

God sets before us this day the choice between fear and joy. Choose joy, and fill your heart and life with the knowledge of God’s great love and power. His love brings us forgiveness for all our sins and his power gives us eternal life with him. Good Friday and the Day of Christ’s Resurrection have changed everything. Everything. Amen.