

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “Threatened With Resurrection”

Easter – April 24, 2011

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#### **Colossians 3:1-4**

*3So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, <sup>3</sup>for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.*

#### **Matthew 28:1-10**

*28After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup>For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.’ <sup>8</sup>So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’*

My daughter Maren was home last weekend for a quick visit. She graduates from Ball State University on May 7. Maren told me that she doesn't know quite how to feel about graduating from college. It is quite an accomplishment, completing four years of college successfully. Yet it means that the relatively secure order of the classroom and campus life is to be left behind. The uncertain world of finding a job in a difficult economy is just ahead. It will even be harder for Maren in her chosen field, Musical Theatre. She doesn't know where her profession might take her. But it is the risk her dreams require her to take. She told me, "I don't know whether to be happy or scared." Fear and joy. I told her that her reaction was quite normal for a huge transition of life.

Fear and joy. I think back to December of 1984. I stood at the chancel area of the First Congregational Church of St. Johns, Michigan staring out at the crowd of friends and family who had gathered. Suddenly the music changed and my beautiful bride came walking down the aisle. My knees started shaking and a wave of emotions washed over me. I was so happy. This was a day about which I had dreamed. God had carried me and supported me through the experience of time and various

relationships to this place and moment. Yet I was also frightened. What if I wasn't ready to be married? Did I know how to be a good husband? What if Laura wasn't really ready for marriage? Was she the right one for me? Was I the right one for her? Did we know each other well enough to withstand the trials of life together? I was happy yet I was afraid.

Fear and joy. I recall the night of March 10, 1989 and the afternoon of October 4, 1993, the dates when my daughters were born. I had always wanted to be a father. I so appreciated the gifts and the example that my parents offered to me. I looked forward to being able to share my life with my own flesh and blood. But as I held Maren and Amelia in my arms for the very first time, a feeling of uncertainty fell upon me. I was a father. What would this child mean for my life? What promises and blessings would come upon me? What trials and complications might be added? Could I have the answers my daughters needed? Could I solve the problems to which they needed solutions? Did I have within me what was needed to be the parent my father and mother were to me? I was so happy yet so afraid.

Fear and joy. It seems like such a strange combination. Fear usually denotes insecurity and doubt. Joy is quite the opposite. It brings with it security and assurance. It would seem as if the two do not go well together. Yet joy and fear seem to accompany each other at most of life's significant moments.

I found these two emotions side by side again this week in the story of Jesus' resurrection. They are right here in the Easter story according to the gospel of Matthew. The narrative is an interesting interplay between the emotions of fear and joy.

It may seem strange on this brightest of all Sundays to talk about fear. But there is a lot of dark fear in the Easter story. On Sunday morning two women came to the tomb to pay respects to the body of the dead Jesus. That alone was a frightening thing to do. Given the events of the past two days, visiting the tomb of Jesus took great courage. According to Matthew, the women were Mary Magdalene and "the other" Mary. The women were totally unprepared for what they would see. Matthew gives a simple description of what happened around the tomb that morning. There was an earthquake. An angel of the Lord descended and rolled the heavy stone away. The angel then proceeded to sit upon that stone. And the women were frightened by everything that they had witnessed.

The guards who were placed to secure the tomb were also afraid. No, in this case terrified is a better word. Matthew says that they trembled and were like dead men. Their fear took their life away. It immobilized them. The angel then spoke and said, "You must not be afraid. Jesus, who was crucified, is not here. He is risen. Come and see the place where he was lying. Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has been raised from death." Yet only the women heard the angel speaking. The guards, charged with keeping things secure, were now the dead ones, paralyzed in mortal fear. The women, afraid but faithful, heard the news of great joy and promise of something yet to be.

Fear? It hardly seems appropriate at Easter. Yet like those guards at the tomb that first Easter morning, the thought of something dead brought to life leaves us shaking in our boots. When an end isn't an end, it is unsettling. It is much easier to deal with Jesus when he is dead. We know exactly where he is. He is easier to follow. But when he is out there in our future, building a new life beyond that which we are

living now, that is a different story. The very notion that God might reach into our settled existence and create something new is a bit scary. “Jesus is alive and goes before you into the world!” How threatening is that when the things in which we have based our security don’t seem all that secure and solid ground under our very feet appears to be unstable? How threatening is that when we have decided we are more comfortable living within diminished expectations rather than with the anxiety of reaching for something unknown? How threatening is that when we have surrendered our hopes to the forces of reality?

Fear can immobilize us like the guards at the tomb, taking away much of our life. But fear can be replaced by trust in God and that is what the power of resurrection invites us to embrace. God has the last word. And if God has the last word, we cannot continue to live our lives just as we always have. Life is more than that. Our resurrection hope is that in all things, something greater is yet to be. That is joy.

William Willimon, the chaplain at Duke University, writes about a physics professor who wanted to really shake up his class. One day this male professor appeared in front of his class in a red dress, with matching shoes, purse, and hat. He proceeded to lecture on a principle of physics for forty-five minutes in such attire. The stunned class just sat there. But they continued to take notes just as always, with no one commenting on the sanity of their professor. Finally at the end of the class, one of the students summoned up the courage to ask what was on everyone’s mind, “What’s with the dress and shoes and purse and hat?” “I’m glad you asked,” said the professor. “I wear this to demonstrate to you that good physics is dependent upon the willingness to have one’s expectations disrupted by new data.” A lesson was taught.

Easter is about our willingness to have our expectations disrupted by new data. It is about basing our ambitions around something other than the same old tired assumptions. It is about our willingness to be surprised, to be challenged, to be led to places beyond the scope of our reality. God cannot be contained. And that is frightening. But Easter is also about naming our fears, facing them, and acting in the midst of them with the promise of resurrection. It is about trusting that God is bringing something better to be. Jesus is alive and goes before us into the world, into the experiences in which we live.

Peter Gomes writes, “Life begins when fear and joy, that odd couple of human existence, enable us despite the one and because of the other, to get on with the serious and glorious business of living and loving.” That is Easter, afraid but joyful, for our Lord who gives us hope is always with us on the way.