

Easter, 2009

The Heart of the Matter

The Reverend Sharon Smith, guest preacher

April 19th (the 2nd Sunday of Easter)

OK. Here's today's pop quiz. Which is frightens you more? Choice A. The resurrection is false. Choice B. The resurrection is true. Think hard before you answer because there is absolutely no other choice. Either the resurrection happened or there was a group of Roman fraternity guys on spring break in Jerusalem, running around in togas, who thought it would be cool to pull a prank. Either two thousand plus years of history is based on a lie or based on a truth. Either just another nobody got lynched, blown-up, guillotined, shot, beaten to death, drawn, quartered, electrocuted or crucified and thrown on a trash heap or the meaning of the cross is central to the meaning of humanity. Again notice that I didn't ask: which frightens you? I asked: which frightens you more? There are only two choices. Here's why.

Jesus frightened people. He frightened them in life, and he frightened them after they thought he was dead. At first they thought that the things he did and said were amazing. The exorcisms. The healings. The brilliant story telling. The astute psychological analysis. The verbal repartee. The water into wine. The hillside picnics. The razzle-dazzle. But all that he said and did frightened those in power. They were the ones who were most frightened by his extraordinary power—by its source and by its nature, and especially by the fact that it was not connected to title or Temple or tyranny. They were frightened not just by what he said or by what he did; they were frightened by who he was. They were frightened because he challenged fear as the primary motivation. He said: fear not. He said it again and again. He lived fear not. He lived it again and again. Those in power were frightened because if the people were not afraid they could not be oppressed, held down, controlled, manipulated, kept in their places. Like all of those who thrive on fear, who depend on fear, they were always lurking in the background, eavesdropping, taking notes, hunting, plotting, bribing, spreading dirty rumors, playing dirty tricks. Fear creates and drives that kind of behavior. Take a look at

history's tyrants. All tyrants, in their dark hearts, are scared to death, and it is the saints who frighten them more than anyone.

It is this fear of saints that leads us to the heart of the matter, to the heart of what we celebrate on this most holy and blessed day. The Gospel is about power; Easter is about ultimate power. The Gospel is about those in power who want to stay in power. The Gospel is about how those in power rule by fear and about how they, themselves, rule by fear because they are so in-their-guts afraid. The Gospel is about freedom from oppression, from enslavement, from tyranny. And the only way that that freedom can be won is if the one who is oppressed, captive, enslaved is no longer afraid. The Gospel is about love overpowering fear even when it looks like there ain't no way in hell that that is going to happen.

Confronting the powers and confronting power is always a fearsome and fearful thing. Consider how the history of the world is the history of one group who dominates another by exerting power over them, either real or imagined or both. Think of a long line of tyrants with names like Attila and Adolph, Genghis and Ivan, Nero and names beyond our remembering. Who you fear depends on who you serve. Let your mind survey history and imagine all those who trembled, cowered, knelt before the powerful. Think of invaders. Think of shattered peace. A peaceful Irish village is destroyed by the Vikings. The Incan civilization is brutalized by the Spaniards. The Jews are tortured by the Nazis. And the demonic institution of slavery in our own nation is fueled by brutality and darkness, by cruelty and systematic, institutionalized fear. There are a thousand horrible examples. Throughout history men and women with spears and knives and cannons and bows and arrows and machine guns and whips and crosses and Lord knows what other devices the evil minds of women and men can conjure up dominated others by force and by fear.

Fear is so effective because it, ultimately, is connected to death. There is a remarkable scene at the beginning of *Saving Private Ryan* that causes you to feel the abject terror that any feel when violent death is imminent. Do you remember the faces of those men as their boats approach Normandy on D-Day? They are scared to death. How many women and men in history have felt that kind of fear? Consider not just being afraid of the enemy that you can see sailing up the river or coming over the mountain or

flying over your unprotected head. Consider how much of what has been said and done since 9/11 has been said and done because of the threat of terror. That is why they call it terrorism. That is why they call them terrorists. Terrorists accomplish what they accomplish because of what they do to the thoughts and lives of those they seek to annihilate. Can you imagine the sum total of fear experienced in the history of nations? Can you imagine those around the world who live in fear this very day, this very moment, as we speak?

There's another kind of fear. It is more intimate, less apparent. It doesn't threaten whole civilizations; it controls the life of another. It can hide under the surface of beautiful faces and designer clothes. It can conceal itself behind manicured lawn and Georgian brick exterior. It can be cloaked beneath a benign, maternal appearance. A husband abuses a wife; the scars are not visible. A mother bullies a child; the scars show up much later. A classmate threatens another; the scars are real. Think of how often we say: "I was so afraid." I was afraid he would blow up. I was afraid I wouldn't have enough money. I was afraid I would make a mistake. I was afraid I was going to lose my job. I was afraid she was going to hurt me. Pay attention this week to how often you say you are afraid or feel fearful. Just as one culture or nation dominates another so one human seeks to exert power over another, seeks to feel power, to get off on power, to control by fear.

Just as a nation can be afraid and a village can be afraid and a person can be afraid at the hands of one or many, one can be afraid all by oneself. Each of us can write scenarios, can create internal scripts that scare us to death with no outside help. Shakespeare said it this way: "A coward dies a thousand times before his death." How many minutes, hours, days do each of us spend being afraid just because of what runs rampant through our minds? How many moments have we spent trembling in anticipation of something that we were sure was going to happen to us? I will flunk that test. She will think I am fat. He will think I am stupid. They will all laugh at me. She will leave me. He will hate me. It all seems so minor compared to facing live combat and yet it, too, can make you sick.

All of these reflections on fear bring us to Mark's account of the empty tomb. We will not conflate the four resurrection accounts. They are different in each Gospel.

Rather, we will focus on Mark's lean and stark version. Mark's version of the crucifixion is so unflinching that when Jesus is executed he is mocked and scorned not just by the chief priests, elders, scribes, Roman soldiers, and folks out for some cheap entertainment, but even by the two men crucified on each side of him. Mark does not tell us that Mary is at the foot of the cross. Mark does not tell us that John is at the foot of the cross. Father Raymond Brown writes: "On the cross Jesus has no friends; he is a solitary righteous man closely surrounded on all sides by enemies." Jesus is crucified because there are two groups afraid of him—the religious leaders and the secular leaders. The religious power structure is afraid that if the faithful buy what Jesus is selling their power base will blow up, that their entire way of life will end.

So they (and we?) would rather kill him in the worst way imaginable than to give up control. The Roman power structure is also afraid that if the people buy what Jesus is selling that their base of power will crumble and The Empire will be threatened. Throughout the history of our faith leaders continue to usurp and distort and abuse what Jesus meant by power; they twist his message of "fear not" into "shake in your boots," into threats of divine wrath and purgatory and hell fire and damnation. As theologian Walter Wink so brilliantly observes: "It is the greatest scandal and infamy that the church could not live with Jesus' God, and preferred the harsh judgmental God of much of Christianity. It is no secret why. A God who keeps score is much better at crowd control." (*The Human Being*, 166-167). But that is not the God of which John writes when he writes: "Perfect love casts out fear." Jesus didn't teach intimidation; he taught forgiveness.

Mark's resurrection account, too, teems with that most human emotion: fear. Three women bring spices to the tomb to anoint the body. They focus on a very mundane task. They wonder how they will get into the tomb to do what they came to do. Who will roll the stone away? And then thrust into that early morning reality is an empty tomb and a man in white who tells them they are looking for love in all the wrong places. "He's not here. He is risen." There's Easter, the abridged edition. But instead of shouting "Hallelujah. Bake a ham" they run. The original Gospel ends like this: "And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and bewilderment took hold of them. And they said nothing to anyone. For they were afraid." Check out the first recorded reaction to the

news of the Resurrection. It is all about fear. They run the other way. They shake. They tremble. They are irrational. They are mute. They say nothing. They say nothing. The message of life scares them to death. Their fear blinds them to the truth. Fear does that. It distorts. It twists. It darkens. It paralyzes. It dominates. It terrorizes. It enslaves. It blinds them, and us, to what really happens. When fear is in control of your heart, there is no resurrection experience. (Repeat.)

So you see today's pop quiz is really a zinger. In fact it is more than a pop quiz; it is the final exam. The answer is that both A and B frighten us. What if it is a lie? If all that you and I profess to believe is not true, if there is no resurrection, if Jesus is a fraud, if the whole thing is a charade, then, I believe, there is a lot to fear. For starters, if the resurrection is a nice little story invented to increase the sale of flowers and jelly beans I have based my life on a lie. And that is a startling thought. Scary.

But what if it is not a lie? What if it is true? If Easter is true, if it is about more than yellow marshmallow chickens and chocolate rabbits, if Easter is true, then it is all true. The call to repent, to rethink, to re-imagine, to reinvent, to be reborn is true. The demand to feed hungry people is true. If Easter is true and the Resurrection is true and the Gospel is true then there are demons waiting to be exorcised, lepers waiting to be touched, coats waiting to be shared off our backs, children waiting to be embraced, women waiting to be forgiven and men waiting to be set free. And THAT is what is frightening. THAT is what is frightening because it changes everything. The life to which the resurrection calls me threatens my power base, my control, my comfort zone, my priorities.

Hear me. If the Resurrection is true then the Jesus of the Gospels is true. I said the Jesus of the Gospels. I did not say the individualistic Jesus of "and he walks with me and he talks with me" alone, alone, alone. I did not say the nationalistic Jesus of God bless my country to the exclusion of any other. I did not say the materialistic Jesus of the multi-million dollar send your money today building campaigns. I surely did not say the Republican Jesus, and I hope I never say the Democratic Jesus. If the Resurrection is true then we are not talking about the mild, tame, I will mold him into my Jesus-Jesus. We are talking about a Jesus who should rock your boat.

We are talking about the Jesus of the Gospels, the Jesus before he got cleaned up and sent to church, the Jesus that wouldn't be on anyone's A list. In his cold-water-on-a-sleepy-church book Gary Wills writes: "[T]he disciples never knew what Jesus was going to do next. He could turn on Peter and call him 'Satan.' He could refuse to receive his mother when she asked to see him. He might tell his followers that they are unworthy of him if they do not hate their mother and father. He might kill pigs by the hundreds. He might whip people out of church precincts." (*The New York Times Op-Ed*, April 9, 2006). If that is the Jesus who is King of King and Lord of Lords, if that is the Jesus who is brought back to life by the hand of our Creator God, doesn't the idea of that Jesus still running around undermining state and church and your nice little life scare you just a little?

So perhaps the women who ran from the tomb are just like us. They are afraid. Fear is the natural response. Maybe the irony is that they are running not because they are afraid that he is dead but because they are afraid that he is alive. Maybe on some cosmically deep level they get it. Maybe they understand that: "The Gospels are scary, dark and demanding." (Wills) Probably not. Probably they are running because that strange man told them exactly what had happened. "He has been raised. He is not here." They freaked. There is no body. There is no Jesus. There is just an empty tomb and a clear explanation. If I was one of them would I be calmly thinking cool? God raised Jesus from the dead. Let me go and tell the world this wonderful news, or would I not be able to think at all? Would I be scared to death?

Dear friends gathered here today, fear may be our first response but it cannot be our final response. The love of God casts out fear. It is time for us to take seriously the hundreds and hundreds of times when the Bible says: fear not. Do not be afraid. Fear not. Do not be afraid. Over and over and over again it says: fear not. Do not be afraid. Why? Because you cannot be simultaneously fearful and loving. Fear robs you of the freedom to choose, the freedom to act, the freedom to love, the freedom to transform and to be transformed. Fear is at the root of all oppression—global, national, local, familial, and personal. Fear, the biblical kind, comes from a dark place. God does not give us the spirit of fear." If God doesn't, who does? One guess.

That is what this day is about. This day is about no fear tee shirts and bumper stickers. The worst thing that could happen did not. Your worst fear can never be realized. The crucifixion has already been transformed into the best thing that could happen. Love won. Love wins. Those wielding false power lose. That which those religious leaders and Romans feared the most came to pass. The temple falls. Even the mighty Roman Empire eventually disintegrates. The unthinkable happens. No one could ever imagine how things would turn out. The one who is seemingly reduced to the most pathetic and powerless and terrifying end imaginable is the Lord of all. And, irony of ironies, it turns out that the fears of the powerful were right on target. What they saw and heard—who he was, who he is—is something they could not ever be. Nothing frightens fear like love.

That is my experience and that is why I am not afraid. That is my experience and that is why I believe the resurrection is true. I believe it is true not just because of what Mark or John or Luke or Matthew said. I believe it because I have seen it in action in the lives of the saints and in your lives. I believe there would be no authentic Christianity without it. I believe it because I stopped running, stopped shaking, got clear headed and told others what the angel said. And I believe it because I know what fear does and I know what love does. I admit that as I continue to worship and study and honor and serve and know the authentic Jesus of the gospels that I follow him with some trepidation. I admit following him will probably get me into some kind of trouble with the ones whose hearts are fear-filled. But I also know this: It's time for me, it's time for us, to stop running scared. Christ the Lord is risen today.

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. April 12th, 2009
and Roland Park Presbyterian Church, April 19th, 2009