

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 9, 2023

Death

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What is your greatest fear? Take a moment and really stop to think about that question. I'm not asking what you are afraid of at this moment. I'm not asking about worries or anxieties. I'm asking, what is your **greatest** fear? What is the thought that wakes you up in the middle of the night and fills you with dread? What downright terrifies you?

This is not an easy question to answer. And you don't need to share your answer with anyone else, I know that would be a lot of vulnerability. But I do believe that this is a question we should reflect on from time to time. The thing we fear the most likely says a lot about who we are, what we value, and our understanding of how the world works. So, what is your greatest fear and what might that say about you and your values?

Surveys of Americans on the topic of fear can vary a great deal depending on time and place. But one of the more consistent answers Americans give to the question is the fear of death, either their own or a loved one's. I can certainly relate to that. There have been times in my life when that has been my greatest fear. I've had moments of doubt when I've considered that death will simply be nothingness and that thought has in the past terrified me. Though perhaps that's more fear of the unknown than anything else.

Such fears often have an outsized influence on us. And not only can those fears be way out of proportion with reality, but they can also be remarkably subtle too; influencing us in ways we don't even realize at times. Unfortunately, fear has also been used as a powerful tool for controlling entire populations of people. We can see examples of that both abroad (e.g., the bombing of civilian infrastructure in Ukraine and Palestine or the "shock and awe" campaign the US conducted at the start of the invasion of Iraq) and here at home (e.g., the American news media's "if it bleeds it leads" method of reporting).

How might your greatest fear be influencing your actions? Your life? Are outside forces using fear to influence you one way or another? Have you ever changed your behavior because of fear? When we start paying attention to fear we can see just how powerful a force it is.

Now, how about another powerful emotion: joy. What causes you joy in your life? What are some of your most joyous memories? What are some of the most common causes of your joy? Any themes in your answers? And what might these answers say about your values and your identity? Yes, I'm sneakily trying to get you to do some mirror work here...it's important!

Oddly enough, when I went looking to see if there were any surveys about sources of joy the way there are surveys about fears, I couldn't find any! The closest I could find were articles about paying attention to "little joys" in daily life. I found some surveys trying to measure happiness, but that's not quite the same as joy, is it? I wonder what that might say about us as a society; that we seem more concerned with fear than with joy.

At this point you can probably see what I'm referencing from our reading today, Matthew 28:8, "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples."¹ Those two women are dealing with some very powerful emotions as they make their way back from the empty tomb. This is both the great blessing, and the great curse of humanity...that we are emotional and that we can have multiple emotions all at once.

We can get into a great deal of trouble by downplaying or trying to ignore what we're experiencing. Unacknowledged and unprocessed emotions often fester in us, and more often than not, that festering leads to those emotions coming out sideways. Unresolved anger towards someone often leads to resentment. Unprocessed grief can cause us to lash out at people when they try to comfort us. Not acknowledging joy when we experience it often means it is more fleeting than it need be.

Unacknowledged fear is perhaps the most potent and damaging of emotions when allowed to fester. It may be cliché to quote Star Wars, but there's great wisdom in the line Yoda delivers, "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering."² Unresolved fear causes suffering, to ourselves and to others.

¹ All scripture quotations from the NRSVUE translation.

² Lucas, G., & Lucas, G. (1999). *Star Wars, Episode I, The Phantom Menace*. United States; 20th Century Fox Film Corporation.

Mary and Mary are both fearful and joyous. One of those emotions may be overshadowing the other, but either way it leads to an appearance by Jesus. The first words spoken in this scene, the opening statement by the angel, deal with fear: “Do not be afraid.”³ But apparently that wasn’t enough, Jesus must echo those words again just moments later.⁴ There is something about what those two women are experiencing that Jesus simply must address.

Fear can control us. It can bind us and harm us. None of these outcomes are life-giving or what we were created for. God does not want us to be fearful! The phrase “Do not be afraid” appears 68 times in scripture, “fear” in general is mentioned over 500 times. Clearly this is an important theme in what God is trying to teach us! Perhaps one of the most helpful occurrences is found in 1 John 4:18a, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”

Along comes Jesus, the font and source of perfect love, and what is he concerned with for these two women? Casting out their fear. Why? Because he loves them dearly and doesn’t want them to be bound by their fear. Whether its fear of death or the unknown or whatever else, we simply were not made to live in fear. And so, Jesus appears to us with the truth...we need not be afraid anymore.

We don’t. I mean it...those who Walk the Way of Christ have nothing to fear. We know the truth of God’s love. We know the truth of God’s power over all the sources of our fear. We know the truth that Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew too, that “God is death’s death.”⁵ God has conquered every reason we might have to fear, even death itself. So, we need no longer live in fear or let it control us.

Ultimately, the message of Easter is a message of freedom and righteousness. In the empty tomb we see the emptiness of our fears. Christ has unbound us from all that seeks to limit or control us. Jesus is showing those two women...and us, the sort of life that we were made to live. One of freedom and great joy. Not a life devoid of fear (we should fear the hot stove), but rather a life without fear controlling us. What amazing news! Amen.

³ Matthew 28:5b

⁴ Matthew 28:10b

⁵ Bonhoeffer, D., (1997). *The mystery of easter*. Crossroad.