Easter Sunday, April 3, 1988
EASTER FEARS
Matthew 28:1-10

Most of us, when we think of Easter, do not connect it with the feeling of being afraid. Rather, we think of Easter as a time to not get too serious. After all, it's a day for joy and celebration — family gatherings, egg hunts for the children, decorated baskets, chocolate bunnies, new clothes, and an Easter brunch. And that's okay. I'm not putting down such festivities. Easter is meant to be a day of joy and new beginnings.

But there is another aspect of the Easter story that is seldom noticed. When the women came to the tomb on that first Easter, they were afraid, they were surprised, they were terrified. When the disciples got the news, they had the same reaction. They were plain scared.

Notice that, according to the Gospel of Matthew, the first words spoken to the women that morning came from an angel who said, "Do not be afraid." A few minutes later, they had an experience of the Risen Christ, and his first words to them were, "Do not be afraid."

I think I can understand some of the reasons why Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were afraid. There had been an earthquake that morning. When they got to the tomb, the stone was rolled away. They met an angel, whereas they had expected to meet soldiers guarding the tomb. They were not even sure they would be able to get inside the tomb to better prepare the body of Jesus. And then they met the Risen Christ. They had gone to the tomb that morning expecting death and had met instead life.

Not only is death itself the ultimate dread, but the circumstances of this particular death made it even more fearsome. No wonder the women were overcome with fear. Their whole world was turned upside down. Their fear, however, did not last long. It was changed into joy.

Of course, our situation is different. That first Easter took place almost 2,000 years ago. We have the benefit of a lot of history in between, a lot of time to reflect and question.

But is the difference only that we know more and therefore fear less, or is it that we tend to gloss over the earthshaking implications of what Easter truly means?

This morning, let's look at two kinds of Easter fear — on the one hand, Easter can make us fearful, and on the other hand, Easter can heal us of our fears.

1. Easter Can Make Us Fearful

Easter can make us fearful, especially when we take seriously what it means for us and creation.

Do you remember the television series called The Twilight Zone? It was on every week and was a kind of mystery-horror program. Once in that series, there was a story about a town in the old West. One day, a stranger came into this town. He was a snake-oil salesman type, only in this horror story, the salesman was selling something much more intriguing. For ten dollars, he would raise someone from the dead. Of course, the stranger became the overnight talk of the town. Though many people were skeptical, many others were curious enough to risk the money — a lot of money in those days — to have someone raised from the dead. Then the

story took a curious twist. People started coming to the stranger in secrecy at night, offering twenty dollars if he would not raise certain individuals from the dead. Of course, it does not take much imagination to speculate why some were willing to pay such hush money. The price has gone up, but the word is that people still pay hush money (sometimes even religious people pay hush money).

But why should Easter, the resurrection of Jesus, fill us with fear and be terrifying? Because it means the power of death itself has been broken.

That should be good news, and it is. But it can also be perceived as bad news for those of us who rely so much on the threat and power of death. If the Easter story is true, then death is not the decisive moral power in history. If the Easter story is true, then death, killing people, and the threat of death lose their power. If people begin to believe this and live accordingly, it upsets everything — our whole world is thrown off balance. Death, we believe, is our ultimate weapon over others. But once an individual or a people, as in the case of the followers of Mahatma Gandhi, believe that the power of death has been broken, then no other person or nation has any power over them anymore. I think that's what Martin Luther King Jr. meant when he said in his most famous speech "I Have a Dream," that he was "Free at Last."

Our world is preoccupied with death and likes to believe in its power rather than the power of the resurrection. The leaders of the people in Jesus' time and the people themselves believed that the way to a just and orderly society is to kill those people we brand as troublemakers or outcasts. By and large, most of us still believe that too.

Hitler called his mass murder of the Jews, "The Final Solution." The final solution to what? What problem did it solve?

The Romans did not invent capital punishment, but they were among the early practitioners of the art of putting to death whoever seemed a threat to their society. As an individual who incurred the hate and fear of both the masses and the authorities, Jesus was executed because of who he was as much as for what he said and did.

Not long after the death of Jesus, his followers were being thrown to the lions in a more bizarre form of execution. When early Christians banded together to worship God, live in common, hold common property, and refuse to take up arms, they were branded as misfits and public enemies and, in many cases, were put to death. It was Rome's "Final Solution." The Roman Empire died long ago, but Jesus Christ and his followers are still very much alive.

Easter can fill us with fear because we still worship death and see it as the final solution to many of the world's problems.

Easter can also fill us with fear because it means that what Jesus taught and lived is true. It means, as St. Paul put it, "That the foolishness of God is wiser than our wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than any strength we have."

What is some of this foolishness of God? Jesus taught with words and with his life, death, and resurrection that for a person to find life, he or she has to lose his or her life, give it away, let it go, and the person who seeks to save his or her life will ultimately lose it. As far as the world's values are concerned, that's foolishness.

“The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” That’s what Jesus said. He also lived and taught, “Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers. Love your enemies. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. Do not be anxious about your life. Those who would be great among you must become the servants of all.”

If Easter is true, then all of these things are true, and we haven’t been living according to those standards. That can fill us with fear. Easter can be terrifying because it continually calls into question all our usual worldly values, all of our usual ways of doing things, all of our usual ways of judging others.

To put it another way, the resurrection means that the world most of us live in, believe in, rely upon, and accommodate ourselves to is radically thrown off balance like some giant earthquake. Jesus’ death, you see, is manageable, understandable, and containable, as any death is all of those things. Death is predictable and therefore manageable. It is the resurrection that throws things off balance, blows the mind, because the resurrection removes things from our control, prediction, and understanding.

Most of us remain a bit terrified at the very thought of total obedience to the demands of the Risen Christ for intellectual surrender, moral surrender, and economic surrender. We are too afraid to live out our days on what the Bible means when it says that nothing, neither death, nor powers, nor principalities, nor persecution, nor things present, nor things to come, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Consequently, Easter, for literally millions, is a day to skate on the surface, to immerse oneself in the delight of the festival but not get too serious because, quite frankly, the whole idea (as it was for those two women in the garden) is too utterly terrifying to contemplate for too long or too seriously.

2. Easter Can Heal Us of Our Fears

Easter can fill us with fear, but Easter can also heal us of many of our fears. Remember the first words which Jesus spoke to Mary and Mary Magdalene were: “Do not be afraid.”

Easter can heal us of the fear that hate and violence will ultimately win. Easter proclaims that the power of life, which comes from God, is always stronger than the power of hate, violence, or death.

Easter proclaims that all the tenderness and strength which on Good Friday we saw scourged, buffeted, and stretched out on a cross — all that beauty and goodness — is again alive and with us now, not as a memory that inevitably fades, but as an undying presence in the life of every single one of us if only we would recognize it.

Easter proclaims the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power.

Easter can also heal us of the fear of the power of sin. Obviously, we’re all sinners, the more so the more we try to deny it. But that’s not the issue. The issue is whether there is more mercy in God than sin in us. Easter proclaims that just as love is stronger than death, so forgiveness is stronger than sin.

Easter proclaims that forgiveness is offered to all of us exactly as it was to Peter. It means that we are relieved not of the consequences of our sin, but of the consequences of being sinners.

It means that we are no longer sinners, but forgiven sinners. It means that instead of trying to prove ourselves endlessly, we can express ourselves as fearless, vulnerable, dedicated, joyous followers of our Risen Lord.

So this Easter, I hope you are fearful, even a bit terrified, because if Christ is risen, then your world is not as you usually imagine it to be, and that means some changes need to be made in the way you live. On the other hand, remember that Easter can also heal you of many of your fears because Easter proclaims that the power of love, which comes from God, is always stronger than hate, violence, and sin, stronger even than death itself. Amen.