Easter Sunday, April 4, 1999
THE FEAR AND JOY OF EASTER
Matt 28:1-10

This past week, as I was reading again the Easter story as told in the Gospel of Matthew, one sentence almost jumped off the page. I've read the Easter story countless times in all four Gospels, but this phrase never caught my attention as it did this time: "So they (Mary Magdalene and the other Mary) left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy."

Here's the background. These two women, both named Mary, had gone to the tomb early on Sunday morning for a visit. They wanted to pay their final respects, as we often say. When they arrived, they were met with the news that Jesus was not there. He had been raised. Then this statement follows: "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy."

The good news of Easter brings both fear and joy. The more I thought about it, the more it began to make sense. The fear and joy of Easter fit together. Here's how.

First of all, like the two women who were first at the tomb, we also respond to the Easter message with both fear and joy. That's because Easter calls into question our usual way of understanding life in this world. It reverses what we usually believe. That brings on fear — and hopefully, joy.

Easter proclaims that life is always stronger than death. Love is stronger than hate. What we think of as weakness can be power. Non-violence is stronger than violence. Good is stronger than evil. God forgives the worst that we can do, over and over again, and makes all things new.

Easter proclaims that we live in a world in which God cannot be eliminated. Just when we think we have God in a box, or on a cross, or in a tomb — when it seems that death has the upper hand — then God breaks out in a new way.

But in spite of the good news of Easter, we live in a world that continues to worship the power of death. We continue to believe that killing people is the solution to most of our problems.

The first murder recorded in the Bible happened because it was thought to be the best solution to a problem. The sons of Adam and Eve quarreled, and Cain concluded that the best way to settle the argument was by killing his brother Abel.

What did God do about it in this ancient story? Did God condemn Cain to death? No! According to the story, God said to Cain, "You will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." Cain was worried that others would kill him because of his crime. But again, God said, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And God put a mark on Cain so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

But still today, we worship the power of death. It's proposed and often used.

An umpire's decision is not agreed with in a baseball game, and angry yells erupt: "Kill the umpire." Property or life is threatened, and someone shouts, "Shoot them dead." One nation is threatened by another, and we say, "Bomb them into submission." An outrageous crime is

committed, and an equally outraged community shouts: “Give him the chair,” or “String him up.”

Every assassination is based on a belief in the power of death. Some people thought that by killing Martin Luther King, Jr., they could stop the civil rights movement for equality. I had a professor in college who said to us over and over again, “Remember, my friends, you cannot kill an idea.”

Jesus was a problem. His ideas were seen as a threat to those in power and as a threat to how the world usually works. Therefore, the people shouted, “Crucify him. Crucify him.”

That will do away with the problem. Yet his ideas and spirit live on, and in an even more powerful way.

That’s why Easter brings fear and great joy. Christ is risen. Death is not the ultimate power, even though we act as though it is. The last phrase of the Lord’s Prayer says, “Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”

The good news of Easter tells us that the power of life, which comes from God, is always stronger than the power of death.

In other words, Easter brings both fear and joy because it tells us that the new is always being born within us and within the world when we least expect it. Easter is the code word that God is continually faithful in providing saving possibilities. These saving possibilities are found amidst the crucifixion of our fondest hopes and our deepest expectations.

Second, Easter brings both fear and great joy because now the presence of the risen Christ is at work everywhere. Before his death and resurrection, Jesus was limited by time and space. His followers would see him here or there, but now he was wherever they were. They experienced this resurrected power that continued to free them from the tombs and slaveries in which they found themselves. And so it is today.

I believe the Risen Christ is seen today in such things as the restlessness that compels the most impoverished, oppressed human beings to know that they have the right to demand freedom and dignity. They are willing to die for that right, and when they do, there is always a resurrection. The result is both fear and great joy.

One person put it this way: “I did not see the Risen Christ at the tomb, and I never touched his side, but I have seen him in many other ways. I was once on a subway. There were these children whose hands kept moving as I looked up from my book past the sea of faces. They were deaf, but they were joyously talking to each other with their hands.”

In my personal experience, I saw the Risen Christ in a smile from a kind, gentle woman of 93 years in a hospital. A pin had been inserted into her hip during an operation. She knew she would walk again. I saw the Risen Christ late one night in the tender love shown by a husband and wife as they comforted each other after the death of their child.

I saw the Risen Christ in a widow, after having spent long and loving hours taking care of her husband while his life ebbed away. And when he died, she did not give up. Instead, she embraced life around her.

Several years ago here in Lincoln, I saw the Risen Christ in the person of a Chinese woman, Nien Cheng. She delivered the lecture sponsored by the Cooper Foundation at the Lied Center. She spoke of her almost seven years in solitary confinement beginning in 1966, in China, as a result of the “cultural revolution,” carried out by the Red Guards. She said she was able to endure the prison, interrogation, and torture because of the power of God that was constantly with her. She spoke of the power of the Christian faith in present-day China, and she spoke of the power of God that had given her the ability to forgive. In spite of her advanced age, she remains a strong and vibrant woman. She also bears no hate.

Too many of us think of Easter in the past tense. We picture it as something that happened almost 2,000 years ago. But Easter is also in the present tense. In addition to being a noun, Easter is a verb. It is not only a once-for-all happening. It is also a continuing action that is still going on.

I like to think of it this way: Easter is a verb that describes the continuing creative loving energy of God flowing through all things, all time, all space. We are part of the flow.

The fear and joy of Easter tell us that all the tenderness and strength that on Good Friday was finally 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 and energy in the life of every single one of us.

Jesus’ ministry was spent freeing people. He said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” But freedom is also a threat to anyone who wants to control us. Freedom, therefore, always has its opposition. That’s why Jesus was killed.

Some of you probably remember the television series Twilight Zone. One episode in that series was about a town in the old west. One day, a stranger rode into that town. He was selling something miraculous. For ten dollars, he would raise someone from the dead. He became the overnight talk of the town.

Though many were skeptical, there were those who 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 secret at night, offering him twenty dollars if he would not raise certain people from the dead. It does not take much imagination to speculate why there were those who were willing to pay such hush money.

The death of Jesus is manageable, understandable, and containable as death usually is. It is the resurrection that throws things off balance and removes things from our control and prediction. Christ is alive, and living in us, and is totally unpredictable, as the disciples discovered. Now they never knew when or where they were going to meet him. That brings both fear and joy.

Third, Easter brings fear and great joy because it carries with it a kind of holy laughter. Here is this unknown nobody, Jesus of Nazareth, calling into question every conventional rule of protocol, defying every earthly power, rewriting his religious tradition, reversing worldly values, saying such ridiculous things as, “The first shall be last, and the last first. Love your enemies and bless those who persecute you. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes, and

where thieves do not break in and steal, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Here is this itinerant teacher deliberately choosing the outcasts, the sinners, the lepers, the disinherited, and the heartbroken, proclaiming hope to all who had no hope, forgiving the undeserving, being inclusive and not exclusive by welcoming any and all into God's kingdom. He was finally tortured and put to death, sealed in a tomb, but now he is alive and everywhere, and his power cannot be stopped. You can see why this news was greeted with fear and great joy.

Easter is a kind of holy humor. It's a surprise gift, something nobody expected. True humor always brings fear and joy — fear because it makes fun of some of our ways of dealing with life, and great joy because we know God is ultimately in control.

Some people, it has been said, no matter how much you try to explain it, simply don't get a joke. Easter is like that. It is God's laughter breaking through.

My hope and prayer for you is that today you will hear God's laughter breaking through and that you will experience this Easter day with fear and great joy. Amen.