

Most of us have heard this story so many times, we think that we could tell it in our sleep.

It probably doesn't fill us with shock or awe because we've heard it dozens of times, surely there's nothing new left glean from it.

But wait a minute.

I don't think that's a fair assessment of this exciting story.

I mean, there's an earthquake in this story, for one thing.

And then, when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb, they did not find the stone rolled away.

An Angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled the stone away and then sat on it!

And the angel was so dazzling white that the guards who were watching the tomb... fainted.

I don't know about you, but when I try to recall the resurrection story as I've learned it over the years, my version doesn't include an earthquake on Easter, or an angel swooping down, and with the strength that only a celestial being could summon, rolling away the giant stone.

And it doesn't include guards passing out, either.

It's understandable that the angel told the women not to be afraid, because that's a pretty terrifying sequence of events.

But the Marys didn't obey the angel's instructions, as the text says that they left with fear and great joy.

Joy and fear.

If I had to describe the Christian experience in two words, those two are really fitting.

It's joyful and it's terrifying.

I would say that I am happy, and slightly afraid, most of the time.

That might sound odd, but it's because as Christians, we are constantly presented with the easy path or the right path, the smooth, paved road that will lead you to the wrong place, or the treacherous road that will lead you to the right destination.

Whether it's how to behave towards our families or coworkers, our boss, or our fellow church members,

whether it's how to respond to societal issues or what to do when you see a stranger being mistreated,

whether it's how to spend your money or your time, we are constantly faced with decisions.

Of course not all of them are scary, but some are.

And when we make the right, the courageous choice in the face of our fears, those are the moments in which we claim our identities as Easter people.

To be people of faith doesn't mean that our fears and anxieties are taken from us, but that we're able to do what's right in the face of our fears.

The Marys didn't run away joyful and unafraid.

They were still afraid, but their faith and excitement, or JOY, is what enabled them to share their good news, in spite of their anxiety.

Having faith in the resurrected Christ doesn't smooth out all the rough places, or still the tremors of this world, after all, we're told there was an earthquake when they arrived.

But believing in the resurrection message, that love conquers all, gives us the ability to keep our feet amid those tremors,

and not only persevere, but even flourish when life is difficult, when you are faced with those challenging decisions.

Now, I know that today's gathering is more diverse than what we have on a typical Sunday morning.

I bet that some of you are only here because your families asked you to come, or you might only be here because it's the Easter tradition,

or maybe you do come all the time but you've still been blessed with a healthy dose of skepticism.

If you fall into any of those categories, maybe you aren't so convinced about this resurrection, life after death, body-disappearing story.

That's okay.

Because here's the thing.

It's not that important to me whether you believe that Jesus was literally raised from the dead.

What is important to me is that you understand the gravity of the moral of this story and why it has survived for 2,000 years.

The resurrection, however you understand it, is God telling us that even our most horrible, despicable, evil sins will not win the day.

Jesus didn't die for the sins of the world, he died because of the sins of this world.

But.

They will never have the final word.

That's what I hope you believe.

The truth is that all the sufferings of this life are transient; all of our difficulties are fleeting.

Real and palpable and painful they might be, they don't have the last word, they don't represent the final reality.

If love had the power to overcome Jesus of Nazareth being nailed to a cross and then hung there until his body couldn't take it anymore,

then God's love for the world, for each of us, has the power to overcome any pain that any of us are experiencing.

This is the Easter message, in its simplest form, and this is why this powerful message has given people the strength to carry on through hell on earth.

This is why the women at the tomb ran away with fear and joy.

That was the joyful part, that love wins, every time at the end of the day.

The fearful part is that we have to take the more courageous path, every. time.

God's love is what gives us the courage we need to persevere, to make the right, often difficult, decisions.

This truth is what gives us the strength or the courage to face our fears, or as John Wayne said, "*Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyways.*"

Now, for all you skeptics that I spoke to earlier, who aren't sure about this resurrection thing, you might not be sure about this concept of God's love either.

You might be thinking that if there is a power greater than us, surely this power doesn't have time or energy to love each of us individually.

But here's the thing, number one, yes it does, and number two, God's love doesn't beam down out of nowhere from some great beyond.

God's love is experienced in our lives, made manifest by and through each and every one of us.

God's love is completely, totally, relational.

All of the Gospel stories of people experiencing love or belonging or healing, it happened because someone showed them love, someone healed them, someone created space for them and told them they belonged.

And every time we summon the courage we need, in spite of our fears, to make the right decision, in those moments we are choosing to be bearers of God's love, in this world.

You might feel demoralized sometimes when you read the paper or listen to the news or scroll through your Twitter feeds.

You might want to pull me aside after the service and kindly tell me that love is definitely not winning out over mite, money and ego.

But those are just the news headlines, they don't report on the millions of people, day in and day out, who are making the right choices, who extend love, compassion and kindness to one another.

It's those people who are really making the world go round.

It's not the powerful people, it's the small ones, the marginalized ones, the ones without the large audience, those are the ones who are doing God's work in our world.

Who were the people who went to the tomb that first morning, as they continued to grieve the loss of Jesus?

Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus' mother.

They represent *“that bright thread of hope that runs through the Scriptures like a vein of indestructible gold:*

*God's trust of the small ones, the ones on the margins, the ones without voice, the prophets whom God lifts up to shine like the sun.”*

What did Mary, Jesus' mom, say in her song of praise after she found out she was pregnant?

The lowly will be lifted up and the mighty will be brought down from their thrones.

Those are the ones we should be looking for, creating space for, giving our attention to.

The ones who have been oppressed and silenced and abused are the ones with the indefeasible hope and joy of the resurrection.

They carry it with them like a sacred treasure that God has bestowed upon them, which allows them to bring love and light to this hurting world.

They are the ones who were given the privilege of sharing the good news with the other disciples.

They are the modern-day disciples who share the good news with the rest of us privileged folk, over and over again.

They stand as shining examples of how to make the right, faithful, good, decisions on the face of fear and anxiety.

Although the women were afraid, they didn't run away and cower and hide.

They didn't make excuses for why they were going to go back to their old lives.

They ran and told the other disciples and continued to carry out Jesus' ministry.

And by the way, the word "disciple," comes from the word, "discipline," which says a lot about what it means to be Jesus' disciple.

We need to have the discipline to be faithful in the face of our fears.

To be hopeful against the odds, to be loving even when we'd rather be anything but.

So, whatever challenges you face when you leave this place,

whether it's a tense dinner table or an uncertain employment future,

or health concerns for you or a loved one,

or pain endured from a relationship, or financial struggles,

or grieving the loss of a loved one, or something else,

may you never forget that what you're going through isn't the end of the story, God isn't done with you yet.

Easter proved that God's love could not be killed.

It also proved that nothing is impossible with the love of God, so may we remember that we can overcome our fears, love our enemies and change the world.

The only thing we cannot do is kill the irrepressible love that's made manifest around us all the time, even and especially, by those whom our society has deemed insignificant.

So take, heart, stare your fears down and choose the right path each time you're given a choice.

We are Christians, Christ-ones, Christ-followers, so may we give thanks for this scary and joyful calling, which always stands on the side of love.

Amen.