



The First Word of Easter

TEXT
Mark 16:1-8

April 12, 2020 — Easter Sunday — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

So many graves ... each one with a name and a network of love; each one with a story and a life that once was. And it was in a place like this, a place that seems a monument to death, God did what love does. God raised Jesus from death. And in a place like this, God will do the same for you.

“Don’t be afraid.” It’s the first word of Easter. The angel speaks this word because angels know this about us: We are almost always afraid. There is almost always something to be afraid of.

I read about Chelsey, a flight attendant. She says flying used to mean bumping into everyone, people tugging at her arm or elbowing our hips to ask for extra peanuts. She said that on a recent flight, of 166 seats, only nine were occupied. They sat far apart, and no one wanted anything to drink. “You can see the fear in their faces,” she said.¹

That’s the way things are now. But fear has never been too far away.

They carried spices. It’s the work the living do for the dead. It’s practical work, and it was loving work. And it was one more reminder that they couldn’t fix it. That is what frightens us.

Sooner or later, we all come to the end of our power, the end of our influence, and we recognize we are vulnerable because we lack the capacity to fix what has gone wrong.

They came to the cemetery. They hadn’t thought through their trip very well. Grief is sloppy like that. They didn’t know how they would actually get to him; who would roll away the stone? They couldn’t.

It’s hard to be your best when you are afraid. I’m not beating up on these women. The rest of the disciples, all the men, they are nowhere to be found. No, I admire that with broken hearts, they honored the Sabbath, and then these women came to the grave carrying spices. It’s a practical work. It’s also a gesture of care, of love; it’s what we do when we can’t fix it. And the very act of doing so reminds us that we are vulnerable.

There was a season when our kids were small when they mistakenly believed that their parents could fix anything — from a broken toy to a skinned knee.

Sarah had a doll where legs and arms, and maybe even the head, snapped into place. She was constantly dismembering that doll. She’d be playing there on the floor, singing lullabies in

foreign tongues. She’d move to stand up and brace herself on the doll, and inevitably a leg would pop off.

“Uh-oh,” she’d say. This one word, “uh-oh,” covered about 80 percent of her activity at the time. “Uh-oh, Daddy, it’s broken.”

“That’s all right, Daddy will fix it.” I snapped the leg back into place. Magic!

One day a thunderstorm came. Clouds soaked up the light. Trees bent as the winds blew. Rain was coming sideways through the yard, and then the electricity went out. “Uh-oh, the house is broken.”

“It’s all right, Sarah. Don’t worry.” A few minutes later, the electricity returns. The lights come on, the ceiling fans spin, the refrigerator hums, and she says, “Yea, Daddy fixed it. Yea, Daddy fixed it.”

I saw no need to challenge her view of reality. Let her believe, as long as she can, that I would take care of everything. Because every parent knows, long before their children are aware, that some things are beyond our control. Even when I want to, Daddy can’t fix everything. We are all vulnerable. And that makes us afraid.

Everyone comes to the end of our capacities to make things

right, to keep things alive. Everyone is vulnerable. You know what I'm talking about. We buy some milk these days, and death feels close. We pass someone on the sidewalk, and it makes us anxious. Everyone is vulnerable.

Paulette Schank was a nurse anesthetist near Philadelphia, but she is also a Lieutenant Colonel in the US Air Force Reserve. She helped put soldiers back together in hospital tents in Iraq. Scott Pelley interviewed her and asked, "When you hear the helicopters coming, do you dread what is coming through the door?"

She replied, "No, it's a chance to ward off that ugly death man who wants to take away your patient. It's your job to make sure he's not successful."²

I'm sure in a very literal way, healthcare workers, first responders, and actually a lot of other folks doing important jobs are feeling that way today. Everyone is fighting the "ugly death man."

A few minutes later, she said, "But it hurts, because too often we fight so hard to keep him from winning ... but sometimes the death man wins."³

Sometimes the death man wins. And we are all vulnerable — which is why fear is never far away; which is why the first word of Easter is "Do not be afraid."

Because this is the truth: At the end of the day and at the end of our lives, there is only God. When death comes, there is no more work to do. There are no more tasks to complete, there are no more battles to fight and sometimes lose. There is only

God. And because God is love, we can trust that all will be well.

Don't be afraid. You can trust in love.

It says the women didn't say anything because they were afraid. But we know that changed. In time, they found their voice. And they became the first Easter preachers.

Thank God for these courageous Easter preachers who faced their fear and chose to trust love — and to tell us the truth.

There are so many graves — each one with a life that once was; each one with a name and a story.

But don't be afraid! And the love of God that calls you by name, the love of God that will never let you go, that holy love, you can trust it with your life.

¹"Exposed. Afraid. Determined," *The New York Magazine*, April 5, 2020, p. 28

²Scott Pelly, *Truth Worth Telling* (2019), p. 88

³*Ibid.*, p. 90

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.