

SERMON – 5/4/26 – Easter Morning

Matthew 28:1-10

“The guards were so afraid of [the angel] that they shook and became like dead men.” (Matthew 28:4)

“The women hurried away from the tomb afraid and yet filled with joy, and ran to tell His disciples.” (Matthew 28:8)

I imagine that if you were asked to say whether fear was a positive or a negative experience, the immediate reaction of most of you would be to say that fear was something to avoid if at all possible. We don't like to think of people being frightened and we would probably do what we could to prevent ourselves and those we love from being placed in a situation that caused us to be fearful. Yet in some ways fear is a profoundly positive thing – it is good to be frightened of danger because it makes us more careful in situations where we might come to harm; on occasion, it is good to be fearful of the consequences of our behaviour because it makes us think twice about embarking on a foolish course of action. And that is to say nothing of the strangely positive and exhilarating feelings many experience from being scared witless reading a thriller or watching a horror movie, being spun around on a roller-coaster or taking part in an extreme sport or hobby like mountaineering or skydiving. For some, fear can be thrilling because it sends adrenaline coursing through their bodies and makes them feel somehow more fully alive. (It doesn't do it for me, I have to say!)

We may not often make the connection between fear and faith, but I think that is precisely what our passage this morning invites us to do. We have probably often read these words (or heard them read) and because we associate Easter (and the message of the resurrection) with joy and triumph, we may never really have noticed that fear tolls like a bell not only through these verses, but also through the accounts of Jesus' resurrection that are given in the other Gospels. And what I would like to consider with you this Easter morning is the extent to which fear *ought* to have a place in our celebrations today and in our experience of Christian living – I don't just mean fear in the sense of 'awe', the rarefied, holy emotion that we might first think of in a spiritual

context – but also the kind of raw, physical terror that we tend to dismiss as being too negative a phenomenon for people to experience in their walk with God.

You see, you simply cannot deny that people were frightened by Jesus and by the kind of things that went on around Him. From the very beginning, as when the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds of Bethlehem and the glory of the Lord shone around them, we find people being scared at what God was doing in Christ. The resonant tones of the King James translation of the Bible speak about the shepherds being 'sore afraid' – perhaps familiarity has sanitised the meaning out of that for us – what it means is that they were absolutely terrified, left shaken and perhaps even physically sick. Even those who were closest to the Lord Jesus were sometimes scared out of their minds – when He came to them on Lake Galilee, walking on the water, they were petrified: 'It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear. On the Mount of Transfiguration, when a voice came from the bright cloud that enveloped them, saying 'This is my Son, whom I love,' Peter, James and John fell flat on their faces in the kind of fright that we might experience on a hilltop when a low-flying jet screamed past us. As we read on Good Friday, when Jesus yielded His life on the Cross under frighteningly dark skies, and the earth shook, those who were with the centurion, guarding those who were being executed, were terrified at the thought of who it was they were dealing with: 'Surely He was the Son of God!' And here we are once more in this morning's reading hearing of things that again provoke fear amongst those who witness them: a violent earthquake, the appearance of an angel dazzling like lightning, the revelation of the empty tomb. The brave guards are scared rigid and to quote what was almost certainly the original ending to Mark's Gospel: 'Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.'

For all that the first Easter was ultimately a day of staggering joy, the primary experience of those who were there was a fearful one, and it leads me to ask you this morning whether fear is part of our experience of God today, and whether, in fact, it should be. The answers, I think, are contradictory.

In my experience, quite a lot of people are actually frightened of God and of the things of God. They may not often be physically terrified in the way people sometimes were of Jesus and His actions, although there *are* some who react quite badly when faced with the things of God. More commonly, people just quietly shy away from things spiritual – how many people on the fringes of the church shy away from engaging in public worship, and how many more are nowhere to be found when the spiritual temperature is raised a few degrees and the suggestion is made that they should actually engage, themselves, with the living God through Bible study or prayer or in active Christian service. There can be hundreds at a church fringe event, but only scores will gather for worship and only a handful will step forward when the specific aim is to seek the Lord's face and His active involvement. And why? Well, there are probably many reasons, but one of them, possibly the central reason, although it is hardly ever articulated, is that many are frightened of getting too close to God.

Most of us are probably guilty of trying to inoculate ourselves against the fear of God? In our worship, the tendency is to domesticate God. We prefer comfortable and comforting experiences in Church rather than to come face to face with the consuming fire and edit out the awesome presence of the living God? Of course, we come together on Sundays in part to nurture our relationship with one another – for many of us, this is the only time in the week when we meet up and there is news to catch up on, pleasantries to exchange, help and support to give or receive – it is right that we should share our joys, our sorrows, our very lives with one another when we gather. But we have to ask ourselves: when we come in through the church door on a Sunday morning, do we expect to meet with the Almighty? Are we prepared to be shaken?

We read earlier the story of those faithful women who had watched and waited with Jesus to the very end – two of the very few who witnessed the burial of His body. Here they are, back at the Tomb, after the Sabbath rest. They came just to look and to mourn. They did not come expecting anything other than to be sad together and to mourn for their lost Master. They could not

even begin to imagine that God would work out His purposes so cataclysmically, never mind that *they* would be the first hearers of the glad news that Jesus had been raised from the dead. I think we are rather like them, despite the fact that we have the benefit of knowing just what God is capable of – is that not what we are here to celebrate this morning? How many of us have come this morning with a living expectation that the Lord God will make Himself known among us or that He will do something earth-shattering in *our* day? You see, while there are those who shy away from things spiritual altogether, at least partly out of fear that they may be drawn into something that is beyond their control, even those of us who *do* draw closer often have only a form of godliness but actually deny its power because we are too scared to let the Most High really have His way with us.

There will be relatively few people who will have had no experience whatsoever of the drawing-near of God – most of us will have been stopped in our tracks at some point, the hairs on the back of our necks standing on end at a combination of circumstances or a sense of presence that can be explained by no other reason than that the Lord has been at work. And in such a situation, we will probably have been touched by a sense of fear – something (or Someone) greater is holding sway and we feel helplessly out of control. But there are two different reactions to such an experience – one personified by the women in our passage this morning, the other by the guards. Neither group can deny that something awesome was going on in or around that empty tomb – they were *all* terrified – but while the women were prepared to accept the supernatural evidence that was presented to them and to go and tell the Good News to others, the guards (and, as we go on to read in the following verses, also the religious authorities), immediately allow worldly pressures and human reason to overtake their experience – rational explanations, however ridiculous, are offered to explain away what had happened. The drawing-near of God is dismissed as never having happened.

When God acts, people sometimes get frightened. Let's make no mistake about it – the coming of the Son of God into the world was an awesome thing; the life of Jesus, His words and actions,

sometimes left people deeply shaken; His suffering, His death and His rising again were accompanied by terrifying signs. So why should we expect the promised presence of the risen Christ among us today to be any different, any less awesome than it was 2000 years ago?

"The guards were so afraid of [the angel] that they shook and became like dead men."

"The women hurried away from the tomb afraid and yet filled with joy, and ran to tell His disciples."

The hymn-writer says, 'Be still, for the presence of the *Lord*, the *Holy One*, is *here*; come, *bow* before Him now with reverence and *fear*... How *awesome* is the sight – our radiant *King of Light*.' It's Easter – let us be joyful, for we have wonderful news to proclaim, but don't let's be surprised if we feel more than a little terror at what that Good News actually means for you and me here today.

Will we be like the guards who once they had picked themselves up from the ground ran off to set in motion a damage limitation plan or will we be like the women who ran off to tell others the Good News?

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!