

St. Lydia's
The Great Vigil of Easter
April 8, 2023
Matthew 27:62-28:10

I can't shake it. A few folks remained after Maundy Thursday, all part of St. Lydia's "liturgy table." We were brainstorming about the Easter Vigil and the season of Easter to follow. Liz Edman shared a line from a sermon she'd heard from a Black Episcopalian colleague some years ago: we are called to be Easter people in a Good Friday world. And then, as if sharpening the insight, Linda Mandraccia recounted our founding pastor, Emily Scott, writing on Facebook this week with a new Easter insight. Apparently she'd been at a local scripture study with colleagues, and came to the realization that in Matthew's account, the women are there at the tomb because they EXPECTED God's faithfulness in raising Jesus from the dead. Jesus told them, not just the disciples but all those who followed him, that "after three days I will be raised." It was so widely known that even Jesus' opponents, gathered with Pilate, repeat Jesus' words. But neither they, nor the twelve, believed it.

Jesus' opponents didn't believe it because they so badly wanted to see Jesus and the movement he was leading destroyed, once and for all. Jesus' disciples—the 12, that is—didn't believe it because they wanted a revolutionary Jesus so his movement would take over by force. So much so that at Jesus' arrest, one of the disciples (John's Gospel says it was Peter) draws his sword to fight. Jesus, for his part, explicitly refuses this violence, and disavows the status of a revolutionary, a figure who requires a squad with swords and clubs to arrest him.

The Easter story is, in a way, a contrast in kinds of fear.

Jesus opponents gather with Pilate, full of fear because of Jesus' prediction that after three days he would be raised. They set a plan in motion to make sure this could not happen. Pilate sent a guard to the tomb, typically four Roman soldiers who could rotate watch through the night. The stone was already a secure method of burial—Joseph of Arimathea, Matthew tells us, was rich, and would have been able to afford the more expensive style of tomb which has a round carved stone that rolls down an incline to cover the entrance. The incline, and size of the stone, made it impossible for animals or grave robbers to roll it back open. On top of that, Matthew tells us, the soldiers put the Emperor's seal on the tomb, threatening anyone who did get by the soldiers with the wrath of Rome if they sought to open it. The level of detail here only deepens the sense of fear they exhibit, the depth to which Jesus' life shook the foundations of the "order of things."

The disciples who, Matthew tells us, "left him and fled" after his arrest, exhibit another form of fear. Liz Edman so beautifully captured this feeling yesterday, when she said in her Good Friday sermon that none of them expected their movement of liberation to end like this. That they thought it was the end is reflected in their fleeing in fear. Liz recounted being in Nashville last weekend for a prayerful support gathering for queer and trans folks in Nashville, and how we, today, did not expect our movements for liberation to be in this place of fear, either.

Amelia, in her Maundy Thursday sermon, so artfully captured the very human response we have when we fear for those under threat right now in our nation: for women and their access to healthcare; for trans people and their safety and ability to thrive; for BIPOC neighbors too often harassed, and sometimes killed, by the police; for people who are hungry; those affected by climate change; people seeking asylum, not knowing where they will find peace. We feel anger, we feel hopeless, perhaps, as with Peter, we deny the truth, and when forced to face it all, we weep bitterly. Yet despite our very human reactions to all this, she said, Jesus taught and acted upon his love for us, to the end.

Yet, there is another story about “fear” here. The whole of the story of Jesus, the whole Bible in fact, is testimony that the mercy and love and justice of God overcomes all worldly striving for power over others, injustice and harm. And as Jesus predicted again and again, on the third day God’s angel messenger rolls the stone away. The guard is so paralyzed by fear they cannot respond. This is the fear both of what will happen to them for their failure of duty, but also fear of this unknown and divine being before them. As Roman soldiers, they only know the logic of kill or be killed, and they can only see this moment as very bad for them.

Yet the women who are there, who have been there all along, already know the end of the story. It is an old tradition with women of God. Linda showed us earlier tonight: In the Exodus story, didn’t Miriam, fleeing Pharaoh and his wrath, fearlessly grab a tambourine for her backpack knowing God would see them to the other side of the sea where she’d need it for her dance of liberation joy? Yes she did.

To the women at the empty tomb, the Angel says, “Do not be afraid.” They know a different logic, one that says “love wins.” This site, where they patiently waited, now becomes the foundation of a new “order of things,” not founded on violence and death, but on belonging and life. The angel sends them off to Galilee to spread the word, to regather those who have fled in fear, and to share this great news with Jesus’ disciples. Note that Matthew tells us they leave the tomb with “fear and great joy.”

Matthew’s text uses the same word for the fear of the Roman guard, and for the two Marys: *phobou*. Yet that very word has two meanings: one, fear or terror; the other, reverence. Yes, the women knew this ground was holy, that from here on, they need fear no more, for the God of all creation had raised Jesus from the dead. As they turn from the empty tomb to go, Jesus himself appears, and the translation tells us he says “Greetings.” Sort of an anticlimactic greeting after just being raised from the dead, don’t you think? But Matthew’s Greek tells us something more profound, a word that is strong enough to hold us tonight, as well. Jesus says, *Chairete*, from the root word *Chairó*, which could be translated “rejoice,” or literally, “Experience God’s grace.” Tonight, the women, and Jesus himself, have the last word: tonight we share together reverence and joy; tonight, we experience together God’s grace. May tonight be for us a vision of living as Easter people Good Friday world.

Amen