

Text: Matthew 28:1-9

Title: “The Fear-Shattering Resurrection”

ILLUSTRATION – This coming Wednesday is our wedding anniversary. Nan and I will be married 38 years. We actually got married Good Friday of Easter weekend so we could have an extra day of vacation for our honeymoon. At the time I was serving as a youth minister in a church and there was a kid in our youth group whose father owned a funeral home. I was a poor college student and couldn't afford a limousine to whisk us away after the wedding so I ask this kid if his dad would loan us the funeral coach for our wedding. They agreed. Have you ever planned to do something and when it actually came time to do it you thought, “What was I thinking? At the time this seemed like a good idea, but now I'm not so sure.” Well we ran out of the church building with our loved ones and friends showering us with rice and started our exciting new journey together as husband and wife ... in a funeral coach. I've often wondered if people caught the irony of that moment. A funeral coach is really out of place at a wedding. And on the first Easter morning some women went to the tomb of Jesus and found some things that were out of place.

Open your Bibles to Matthew 28:1. (If you don't have a Bible please feel free to grab one out of the pew rack in front of you. It's on p.989.) Here in Matthew 28 it's Sunday, now in the third day after Jesus had been crucified and buried. But remember that Jesus said He would be crucified, buried and raised to life on the third day. Here is the record of what actually happening. Read Matthew 28:1-8.

Did you catch the fact that every human being on the scene that Easter morning was gripped with fear? The soldiers guarding the tomb of Jesus were afraid. And there was plenty to make them afraid. There was the violent earthquake. That's enough to scare anyone. But then there was the arrival of an angel, whose appearance was like a blinding white light. And if that wasn't enough the angel proceeds to single-handedly roll away the massive stone that covered the opening of the tomb of Jesus, and then he sat down on top of the rock. And if that wasn't enough these soldiers had been charged with keeping the tomb secure. The Roman authorities wanted to make sure someone didn't come and steal the body of Jesus and claim that he had risen from the dead. Now the body of Jesus is nowhere to be found. They would lose their jobs, possibly their lives for this. No wonder these hardened soldiers shook like leaves.

But they were not the only fearful ones on the scene. There were women who loved and followed Jesus who came to the tomb that morning. They went expecting to find a dead man in need of embalming; instead they found an empty tomb. They saw the stone already rolled away from the entrance to the tomb and even more startling, the body of Jesus was not there. The whole scene creates fear and confusion in the hearts of these followers of Jesus. This was not at all what they expected.

I'm grateful that the Bible doesn't gloss over details like this. In fact, fear may be the most prevalent emotion described in the Bible. That's because it's such a prevalent emotion in our lives.

PHOTO and QUOTE ILLUSTRATION – Author Suzanne Collins taps into this in her trilogy, *The Hunger Games*. The story takes place in a society that is saturated with fear. Every year, children are chosen to participate in a compulsory annual televised death match called “The Hunger Games.” If you read the book on your Kindle or a similar devices it tracks what other readers have highlighted

in the book. So as you're reading along you see passages marked that many other readers thought was noteworthy. Amazon recently reported that by far the most highlighted passage in all the books ever read on Kindle comes from the second volume of *The Hunger Games* entitled *Catching Fire*. The most highlighted sentence simply says, **"Sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them."**

You don't have to be familiar with the plot of *The Hunger Games* trilogy to know things happen to us all the time that we're not prepared to deal with. And that creates fear in us. Life is filled with fears. Some are reasonable and some are unreasonable.

ILLUSTRATION: A couple of weeks ago we had to take my mother-in-law to the emergency room. I was sitting out in the waiting room while they were taking care of her and I heard the clomp-clomp of a woman's shoes hitting the floor hurriedly as she raced into the emergency room. I looked up and this rather young woman was obviously very frantic. She yelled at the attendant, "Something's wrong. I have this pain in my neck and this pain in my stomach. I just know I have a tumor. I want you to run a full scan to find out where it is." She had already diagnosed herself and convinced herself that she had a tumor, and was going to die.

We fear a catastrophic illness, or the loss of our job, or not being able to find a job when we graduate. We fear for our aging parents and we fear for our kids. Fear is like a computer program that is running in the background of our life all the time. Fear causes our hearts to race and our palms to get sweaty and our breathing to quicken. It keeps us awake at night. To deal with it we either eat too much or we don't eat at all. It creates a cloud of dread over our days. It distracts us from meaningful relationships with other people. "Sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them."

So I'm grateful the Bible doesn't gloss over the very real fears that we have. But neither does the Bible leave us without hope that we can overcome our fears. Notice the two different responses to these fearful circumstances that first Easter.

Matthew 28:4 - The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

They trembled in fear ... they shook. And they became like dead men ... like zombies ... the living dead. The pressure of fear can paralyze you if there's nothing inside to support you. But then there were the women who followed Jesus. Yes, they were afraid, but they faced their fears differently. In the end...

Matthew 28:8 - So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy...

That's just the opposite of the response of those crusty, hardened Roman soldiers. So what happened that enabled these women to not be paralyzed by fear but to go on their way ... and to go on their way with joy. What made the difference? What might make the difference in your life today that would allow you to face your fears and to not be paralyzed by them but to walk out of this Easter service filled with joy?

The answer: the fear-shattering resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Christ shows us that God can make that which we fear the most a doorway into His glorious future for us. What gave these women victory over their fears is the very thing that happened inside that empty tomb. Jesus Christ died and rose again to defeat our greatest enemies of sin and death. And if our greatest enemies have been conquered we can live life without being afraid of anything or anyone else.

Here's how the resurrection of Jesus can help you overcome your fears. Here are some fear-shattering strategies:

1. CLING TO THE WORD OF GOD.

Matthew 28:5 - The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified."

There was something spoken to them that enabled them to push through their fears to the future God had for them. You need a word from God to get you through the fearful experiences of life. The Bible is filled with promises for us in the face of fear. One of the most frequent exhortations in the Bible is, "Do not be afraid." We need to hear God calling us out of our fears.

If God tells you to stop being afraid it must mean that it is possible for you to stop being afraid. Every command of Scripture is also a promise that in God's power you can do it.

You need to hear God saying to you today, "Do not be afraid." It must have been so reassuring for the disciples to hear the words from the angel, "I know ... I know you're looking for Jesus who was crucified." God knows our fears and also He knows the plans He has for us through all that we are facing. So He can say, "Do not be afraid."

The next fear-shattering strategy is...

2. COUNT ON THE POWER OF GOD.

Now the angel made a startling announcement:

Matthew 28:6 - He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

"He has risen." Don't glide over those words. Let them grip you. The worst enemy we have as human beings is death. But it could not stop Jesus. The grave could not hold Him back. Sin and death took their best shot, but God has power over them and He raised Jesus from the dead. And it's that same power that transforms our lives.

Those women who visited the tomb that first Easter morning thought it was all over. As far as they know Jesus is dead. The situation had "dead" written all over it. What will they do now? And from a human perspective there may be something in your life that has "dead" hopelessly written all over it. Maybe you've messed up and your life has "dead" written all over it. That may be true if you don't

factor in the power of God. Maybe your marriage has “dead” written all over it. That may be true if you don’t factor in the power of God.

The power of God changes everything. The resurrection of Christ shows that God has the power to make that which we fear the most a doorway into His glorious future for us. Cling to the word of God. Count on the power of God. But here’s the third strategy:

3. LIVE IN THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST.

One of the most crippling things about fear is that we are tricked into thinking that we are all alone. Life has handed you something that you just don’t feel you’re equipped to handle, and you think there’s no one to help you handle it.

One thing that allowed these women to break the grip of fear is the promise that they would not be alone. Jesus would be with them. Remember the angel said...

Matthew 28:7a - ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’

“He is going ahead of you.” You don’t have to fear the future. He’s there. “There you will see him...” The resurrection of Jesus tells us that wherever circumstances take you, He will be there.

Fear paralyzed the soldiers. They become like dead men. But fear didn’t paralyze these women who followed Jesus. The difference between the soldiers and the women is that the women had a relationship with Jesus. He was alive and He would be with them.

Matthew 28:8 - So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

And look what happened next:

Matthew 28:9 - Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.

God’s Word is true. There is Jesus standing before them ... and they worshipped Him. That’s where God intends for this whole situation to go. He wants people to trust Him, see His power and give Him glory in worship. It’s amazing that these people came through this frightening ordeal and end up worshipping. And there’s hope that you can do that as well.

The resurrection of Christ shows that God has the power to make that which we fear the most a doorway into His glorious future for us. The resurrection of Jesus Christ shatters fears. Your fears don’t have to destroy your life and your relationships today.

These women overcame their fears that day because they had a relationship with the One who had overcome their greatest enemy. And many of you hear today already have a relationship with Christ.

You just need to trust Him with that situation that is causing you to be afraid. Trust His promise, His power and His presence.

Some of you don't have a relationship with Jesus. By that I mean that you have never put your trust in Him and turned your life over to Him. So you're facing your fears alone. But that can change today. In fact, I take you back to the great invitation of the angel to the women on that first Easter morning...

Matthew 28:6 - He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

“Come and see...” That's an invitation to experience first-hand the awesome promise, the power and the presence of God in your life.

1 Peter 1:3 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

ILLUSTRATION – I have here a delicious apple. And it is really sweet. But you don't know that, do you? You might take my word for it, or you may not believe me at all. The only way for you to really know for sure is to taste it for yourself. You may have all kinds of questions and doubts about this. And some of those doubts and questions may not go away. The only way to know for sure is to taste and see. But it's not an experiment. When you receive Christ by faith it's the commitment of your whole life to Him. Then and only then do you know for sure.

Romans 10:9 - If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

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