



FEAR, JOY AND WORSHIP AT THE EMPTY TOMB

Catalog No. 7198

Matthew 28:8-10

John Hanneman

April 20th, 2003

Today is Easter Sunday. Two days ago we gathered in darkness to reflect on the excruciatingly painful sacrifice of the Lamb of God, given for the life of the world. In somber meditation we felt the loneliness and despair of a world separated from God by sin, and the unimaginable cost borne by him to provide a way of salvation for mankind.

But the darkness did not last long. This morning we gather in glorious light to celebrate the greatest event in human history. Christ the Lord is risen today! This morning we glory in the resurrection.

Each of the four gospels gives a slightly different version of the events of that resurrection morning. Matthew records that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the tomb after the Sabbath, on the first day of the week.

These two Marys had been healed by Jesus and had become his followers. He had cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene. The other Mary, who also had been healed from possession by evil spirits, was the mother of James the Younger and Joses, or Joseph. She had witnessed the crucifixion and the entombment. Many women who had been healed by Jesus followed him all the way to Jerusalem and to his death. Thus it is appropriate that a woman should share her story with us this morning, for Jesus treated women with such tender compassion.

Approaching the tomb, the two women came upon an angel. His appearance was like God himself—a terrifying sight. The angel had rolled away the stone, not to let Jesus out, but to let the women see the empty tomb. He told them that Jesus had risen, and gave them instructions to tell the disciples to meet the Lord in Galilee.

Our text reveals how the women responded:

And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me.” (Matt 28:8-10 NASB)

The two Marys ran from the empty tomb “with fear and great joy.” John Donne observed in this action “the two legs of fear and joy.” Reading this phrase I was struck with the meaning of Easter. Isn’t this what Easter means? Isn’t this what an empty tomb means? Isn’t this what the resurrection means? As we are confronted with a humbling and overwhelming glimpse of the greatness of God we are filled with indescribable joy.

Fear

Departing the empty tomb, the women were filled with fear. Did they fear for their lives, thinking something terrible would happen to them? I don’t think so. They probably

were wondering what had happened to Jesus. Had someone stolen his body?

But then they began to wonder about the implications of the empty tomb. They realized that Jesus might not be dead. He might be risen from the dead. They were witnessing something unexplainable and incomprehensible, something their minds could not grasp. This was why they departed with fear.

Throughout the Bible, the words “Do not fear, do not be afraid,” form a recurring refrain. But there is another refrain in the Bible: that we should “fear the Lord.” There is an inappropriate, unhealthy, negative form of fear, and a healthy or positive fear. Unhealthy fear comes when we are focused on ourselves; when we are anxious about the future and paralyzed with doubt; when tragic and unexpected events rob us of hope. We fear inappropriately when we lack trust in God.

But we experience a healthy fear when we are focused on God; when we lose ourselves in his brilliance and splendor; when the veil of heaven is drawn away and we see him in his glory and majesty; when we stand before God not dreading condemnation or punishment, but are astonished by his grace and power.

We read of this second kind of fear throughout the New Testament. This is the fear that we are to feel as the people of God. While perfect love casts out unhealthy fear, and “in Christ there is no condemnation,” a healthy fear in response to an empty tomb is essential to our spiritual life and growth.

This is the kind of fear that characterized the early church, as we see in the following passages from the N.T.:

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the *fear* of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase. (Acts 9:31)

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the *fear* of God. (2 Cor 7:1)

The thing that keeps us separated from God as sinners, and one of the reasons we fall short of the glory of God, is that, as Romans says, “There is no *fear* of God before their eyes” (Rom 3:18).

Gazing into the empty tomb the two women were not concerned about themselves. They were completely overtaken by a God who had overwhelmed them with his power, majesty, glory and honor. This is the fear of the Lord that grips us as we approach the empty tomb and realize that Jesus is alive.

The fact that God’s son died an excruciating death and rose again should evoke in us profound reflection. But the

fact that he did this for you and me, utterly of grace, should fill us with the awesome fear of the Lord.

Joy

“Great joy” was the second response of these two women. Even as they were filled with fear, their hearts were leaping, their voices rejoicing. Were they glad because their friend and mentor was alive? Certainly this would cause them to rejoice. But it was much more than that. They were filled with great joy because the promised Savior had come, the longed-for Redeemer of God’s people had revealed his glory, and the power of sin and death had been broken.

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55). The fear of the Lord makes our grateful hearts tremble at the magnitude of his glory, and the joy of the Lord causes us to rejoice with gladness.

Isaiah foresaw the joy of the empty tomb and the risen Lord when he wrote:

Shout for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done it!
Shout joyfully, you lower parts of the earth;
Break forth into a shout of joy, you mountains,
O forest, and every tree in it;
For the LORD has redeemed Jacob
And in Israel He shows forth His glory. (Isa 44:23)

When Jesus was raised from the dead, all of creation applauded and rejoiced—the heavens, the earth, the mountains, the forests. Now, as believers in Jesus and in his resurrection, our voices join in the chorus.

Peter speaks of this same joy:

and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet 1:8-9)

Three weeks ago my daughter Sara was married. I anticipated that day with both fear and joy. I was fearful, because a wedding demands a great deal of preparation and costs a lot of money. I was fearful for the future of the young bride and groom. Having been married for 28 years, I know that life will not always be easy for them. I was fearful with an unhealthy kind of fear, like the father in the movie *Father of the Bride*.

But what I did not anticipate was the inexpressible joy I felt as a father walking my daughter, a beautiful bride, down the aisle. The ceremony was meaningful and the reception was a joy-filled occasion. But beyond that “good-time” feeling there was a sense of sweetness and joy that came from the presence of God’s Spirit and the gathering of a community of friends who shared a long history. One of the most delightful things about the wedding was the response of our neighbors and non-church friends who were overwhelmed by the palpable presence of life and joy—the joy of the resurrection.

As I reflected on the wedding I realized that I had experienced in a small measure the joy of an event yet future—

the heavenly wedding when the Church is wed to Christ. This is the kind of joy that we have now because of the resurrection of Jesus. This is the great joy that the women experienced at the empty tomb. This is the great joy that we experience at Easter.

Worship

What happened next for these two women, running from the tomb on “the two legs of fear and joy”? They ran into Jesus! Why did Jesus reveal himself there? The angel gave the women all the instructions they needed. It strikes me that the resurrection doesn’t really come home for us until we see and experience with our hearts the resurrected Lord.

And what was the women’s response to the resurrected Lord? The text says, “And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.” That should be our response, too. The fear and joy evoked by the empty tomb yields a heart that both sees and worships the risen Lord.

My son and I went to San Francisco yesterday to see one of the great paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, *A Portrait of a Lady with the Ermine*. This is a work of art on par with the Mona Lisa, even though it is not as well known. It is the brilliant work of a master. And yet its glory and significance are miniscule compared to the resurrection. We honor the great masters and marvel at their accomplishments, we stand in awe at creation, but nothing compares to the resurrection of Jesus. When we encounter the risen Lord our hearts explode with worship at the work of the one Master who is above all and in all and through all.

Today is Easter Sunday. As we assemble we gaze at an empty cross and an empty tomb and are met by the risen Christ. Are we humbled and astounded by the majesty and greatness of God? Are our hearts filled with joy because in Christ we too are risen from the dead? Is our response to fall down and take hold of the feet of Jesus and worship him?

Today is Easter Sunday. Perhaps you are not quite sure what to do with this day. It makes you feel uncomfortable. You have never responded to the empty tomb and the risen Jesus. Don’t feel alone. We have all been there. To you, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid.” Believe that the cross is for you and take hold of Jesus, risen from the dead.

Today is Easter Sunday. Today we celebrate the one holiday on which we are not overwhelmed with materialism and other distractions. Let us fear, rejoice, and worship our risen Lord, our exalted king, our great God.

© 2003 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino