

This is Us: After the Cross, the Crown

Matthew 28

Over the last six weeks, we have shared the stories of why we do what we do as people of faith. On this journey, we have shared some of the stories of the holy moments connected with our community of faith. We have explored a few of the holy spaces which are a part of our worship life together as a community. We have also remembered our past while naming the very present Kingdom of God in our midst. And now, this week, this week, as we stand before the empty tomb, we celebrate the main reason why we do what we do as people of faith. We hear once again the resurrection story of our Lord and Savior, a story which reminds us, as the people of God, after the cross comes the crown. On this day, standing before the empty tomb, we gather again to tell the old, old story, to tell how our Savior stepped out of the darkness, how he overcame death. On this day, standing before the empty tomb, we gather again to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

I purposely chose Matthew's version of this story because I have to say, I love how he begins his story. Unlike the other Gospel writers who start their telling of the old, old story in peace and quiet, Matthew starts his telling of the same story with a bang! Sure, he lulls us in, thinking we are hearing the same old thing, until Bang! He throws in an earthquake, then follows that up with an angel descending

from heaven. Unlike the other Gospel writers who let us ease into Easter morning, first thing Matthew does is scare the bejeezus out of us! With a powerful start to the same old, old story, Matthew captures our attention. The awe and wonder we feel in this most holy of moments, this awe and wonder will not let us go. They have become a part of who we are as people of faith. And as this awe and wonder sink into our very beings, we can feel the very ground upon which we stand shift beneath our feet. In this moment and in all the moments yet to come, we realize that nothing is as it was before. The world has been transformed. We have been transformed. Because new life is readily available for all of God's children. For us, for all of God's creation, the old, old story of Jesus and his love tells us, reminds us, shows us that the Kingdom of God is here, made real for all to see!

This amazing life changing gift which has been given to us this day is almost too overwhelming to think about. It is almost too much for us to comprehend. The very knowledge of this causes us to tremble...yet just when we think the power and might of this moment will be too much for us to bear, we realize that the very first words spoken to us on this Easter morning are: "Do Not Be Afraid!"

This is what the angel tells the women. After they had just experienced this earth shattering, life changing, most holy of moments, a moment which shatters everything they thought they knew, a moment which turns their world upside down and inside out, in this moment when the very ground shifts beneath the women's

feet, causing the guards to pass away in fright, the angel simply says, “Do Not Be Afraid”. And then suddenly, everything makes sense. The women are given a promise of Jesus’ presence. They are given a message of hope and peace. In these words, through these words spoken to the women at the tomb, suddenly all of God’s people are given a glimpse into the promise and hope which the future holds for us as the people of God. Through these words spoken by the angel to the women, spoken to us on that first Easter morning, the old, old story becomes alive once more, reminding us we have nothing to fear because Jesus will always meet us along the way.

It’s no a coincidence that in his telling of the old, old story, Matthew shares one of the most used phrases found in the Bible. This phrase of “Do Not Be Afraid”, in some way or another, this phrase is woven through the beginning to the end of our sacred text. Verse by verse, chapter by chapter this phrase is shared with us over and over again until we realize that, as people of faith, our very story, the story which guides us, the story which comforts us, the story which gives us hope, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, our story of faith, the story which sustains us as the people of God is just one big...”Do Not Be Afraid!”, spoken to us time and time again by a God who loves us more than we will ever know.

Of course, Matthew, being a smart writer and being a person of faith himself, already knows all this. That’s why he uses it over and over again in his

telling of the old, old story. Matthew does this to remind his community of their connection to God's unfailing promises. In this moment, when their world has been turned upside down, Matthew reminds his community of the promises given to them by a God who loves them more than they can ever imagine. In this moment when they are so overwhelmed by the unknown future, Matthew wants his community to hear this phrase and remember, remember all the times this particular phrase is used in their sacred text, to remember all the promises which always accompany this one phrase, promises such as "Do Not Be Afraid! I am With you!", Promises such as , "Do not be Afraid! Even though the mountains may shake and the earth may crumble, I will never leave you alone!"

In this moment when it seems impossible to trust that the light will overcome the darkness, Matthew wants his community to hear this phrase on Easter morning and all the mornings yet to come, he wants them to hear this phrase and remember, remember the promises given to them by their God, the promises which also "Do Not Be Afraid! For I bring you tidings of Great Joy. On this day a Savior has been given to you.

This phrase, these promises become a beacon of light for Matthew's community, signaling to them that this moment at the empty tomb was not and is just any moment. It was, is, and forever will be a moment which announces a rebirth for their Lord and Savior. It was, is, and forever will be a moment which

announces a rebirth for all of God's people. For the people of God, past, present and future, these words of Do Not Be Afraid become symbols of hope for us as they announce a new beginning for all of creation now and always

Because, you see, Matthew knew something we tend to forget or ignore as people of faith. He knew that "Fear is like a poison. It is an ugly thing which can poison our lives and distract us from becoming the people God created us and calls us be." Just think about our world: Fear is what's at the base of all our debates. Fear of missing out is what drives our consumerism. Fear of losing out is what is actually making us lose out on the goodness which already fills our lives. If we would only have the courage and strength to open our eyes, we would see what is right there in our midst, the presence and promise of the Risen Savior.

As people of God, we have been given the call to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love, not just today but all days. We know the power of this story. We know the life giving nature of this story. We have seen and experienced the Risen Christ in our lives. And because of that, we know, we know that until we allow love to drive out all fear, fears will drive out all love. We know that until we allow love to rule our world, fear will always overwhelm our world. Or as someone once told me, "Fear may sell policies, garner votes and hawk hardware, but it doesn't save. There is only one thing that has the power to set us free and that is God's love."

That's what the story of the resurrection does for us, does for the world. It releases us from our fears. It breaks the cycle of anxiety. It empowers us to see beyond the hate and hurt, to see beyond the pain and sorrow, to see beyond the cross, and to experience the crown. As people of faith, we know how the story ends. Standing before the empty tomb, while others see the impossible, we see and know that we belong to a living God. As disciples of the Risen Christ, our past, our present and most assuredly our future is held secure in the arms of our God who is active in this world, bringing healing and wholeness to all of God's people.

In the telling of his story, by using this one phrase, this phrase of "Do Not Be Afraid", Matthew ties everything together for his community, ties together their past, present and future. He reminds them, he reminds us that no matter what, no matter how much the darkness threatens to overtake us, no matter how much the powers that be threaten to silence us, no matter how much the brokenness and hurting of this world seems to be growing, on this Easter morning, with a bang and a flash of light, God is showing us we have nothing to fear. On this Easter morning, God showing us again how love can truly drive out fear. On this Easter morning, as we gather to tell the old, old story, once again we are reminded that love will always have the last word.

So this morning, this is Us, telling our story as people of hope, as people of love, as people of WELCOME, standing before the empty tomb, becoming the

people God calls us to be. As we leave this place today and all days, we know we have nothing to fear. We have nothing to fear as we claim who we are, as we claim whose we are. We have nothing to fear as we claim who we are called to be as a community of faith, living out our mission and vision of welcome in this world. Here and now, and in the days yet to come, as the people of God, we have nothing to fear...all because we have seen the empty tomb, all because we have experienced the Risen Christ and know that we will always meet him along the way.

So Midway Christian Church, past, present and most assuredly future...in worship, in fellowship, in mission, and in study, today and all days, with nothing to fear, This is Us: standing at the empty tomb, loudly proclaiming that after the cross comes the crown as we tell our story now and forevermore as the people of God.

Amen.