
Fear and Joy

Matthew 28.1-10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 8, 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Today is a day of emotions so powerful you can smell them, like the bouquet of spices in a Middle Eastern bazaar. Easter. The nerve centre of the Christian faith. The biggest day in world history. The day death died. The shape of the Church's creed blended together with the rhythm of the season, so that Christ's bursting from the tomb is echoed in a myriad of budding flowers and blossoming trees. Truth, beauty, goodness – today they have the upper hand. Through crucifixion tears we sense a hint of resurrection glory. Can it be true?

And of all the feelings and passions of Easter, I want to focus our hearts on two – two emotions that embody the energy of today. I want to take you back to that distant Sunday morning, the first day of the week, when the dew lay heavy, the sun was warming up, the birds were shaking sleep away with the thrill of dawn, and all creation breathed in the smell of anticipation. Two people rose early, their sandaled feet covered in dust and strained by running. They went to the tomb, and met there an angel, who broke open their whole world, saying 'He is not here: he is risen.' Feel the intensity of their emotion: smell it. St Matthew tells us what they did, and what they felt. They ran. They ran, with fear and great joy. With fear, and great joy. And we can see them running, with fear, with the hasty, gulping breath of fear, and with gurgling joy, with the outstretched hands and billowing cloak and squealing yelps of joy.

Fear and great joy: at the heart of the resurrection, and at the heart of the Bible. Fear of judgment: Adam and Eve, banished from the Garden, Cain, discovered to be a murderer, David, exposed as a scheming adulterer, Israel itself, thrown into exile as a result of its sin. Fear of holiness: of the God Moses met in the burning bush, and met again on Mt Sinai, amid thunder, lightning, fire and smoldering cloud. Fear of the coming day of the Lord, the day when God "will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth" (Zephaniah 1.2). Fear to take any risk, like the third servant in the talent parable who buried his talent in the ground. Terrible fear.

And yet also great joy. After forty days of rain and 150 days of flood, Noah sends out the dove and it returns with an olive branch. After the shame of the tower of Babel, God calls Abraham to be the father of a nation. As the Ark of the Covenant is brought into Jerusalem, David dances before the Lord. As Ezra reads out the books of the Law to the returning exiles, they weep with joy. As Elizabeth greets Jesus' mother-to-be she feels the babe within her leap for joy. Zacchaeus picks up his skirts and runs home with glee to prepare a kingdom banquet for Jesus. The father of the prodigal son is bursting with joy to see his wayward son come home. Great, great joy.

Fear and great joy: at the heart of the resurrection, and at the heart of the experience of faith today. Fear that some new discovery will discredit the historic faith of the Church. "Archaeologists find Jesus' laptop" screams one headline. "Jesus was at the center of a dodgy import-export business, offering loaves and fish in return for frankincense and myrrh," alleges another. "Prayer is a bogus reaction traceable to lack of oxygen in the womb" says a third. Fear that the fabric of the society that has shaped the gospel will come apart, that marriage and family life are disintegrating, that major denominations are mired in self-doubt, that other faiths and new technologies will dismantle any sense of certainty we may still have. Fear that we're just not good enough to be a Christian, that Jesus calls us to peace when we know our own violence, that Jesus calls us to generosity when we know our own selfishness, that Jesus calls us to the way of the cross when we know we're terrified to die. Horrifying fear.

And yet also great joy. Joy when you discover that love isn't just a slushy word or a passing feeling, but that it became flesh in Jesus Christ. Joy when after years of living under the burden of guilt and self-hatred for something you've done, you finally hear the words "You are forgiven" and know it's true. Joy when all your anger and frustration and despair about suffering and cruelty and hatred in the world is transcended when you hear a voice saying "This is what you are to do," and you realize it's your vocation and you have a part to play in God's story after all. Joy when you're going through a hard time and someone from your church leaves a card or

brings some food or gives you a look which says "I don't know you very well, but we're both part of the body of Christ, so I'm here for you." Joy when you meet a person very different from you, a person whose face or manner or language you find a little alarming, but in whom you come to discover you've met Christ. Joy when a person says to you, "I don't know if it's something you said, or just doing some of this stuff with you, but I've come to believe in Jesus and my life has been transformed." Joy. Fabulous joy.

Fear and great joy: at the heart of the resurrection, and at the extremes of our hearts today. So much to fear, so many reasons to be afraid. Fear for ourselves, that we'll experience crushing disappointment, that our faith will turn to dust, that our hopes will be illusions and our critical friends be proved correct. Fear for those we love. Fear that however much we love and however much we care we shall still have to face the awful moment of parting, of letting go, of aching loss and separation. Fear that we can't protect our loved ones from the horror of death. And fear about issues way beyond our control, from terrorism and war that destroy countries to the addictions and diseases that destroy lives to the greed and plunder that are destroying the earth. So much to fear.

And yet also great joy. Great joy. Joy of a baa-lamb finding its rickety feet in a meadow; joy of a baby discovering how to swallow; joy of the song, when we have the words, and God has the tune; joy of the harvest, when all is fresh and mellow. The joy of friendship, of those we have known and loved through thick and thin. The joy of forgiveness, when bitterness and failure do not get the last word. The joy of creation, when we hear birds chirrup on a spring morning. The joy of being part of a team, when you believe in what you are doing and where you are going. The joy of the orchestra, about to break into a thrilling crescendo. The joy of a craftsman, perfecting his wood. The joy of today is feeling all our love, and the love for us, that is in the world, and then realizing that that intensity, that love is just a keyhole we look through, and beyond is a shimmering garden of delight. Just a keyhole, and we look together on God's garden, restored and glorious. Great joy. Great, great joy.

So here we are, at the moment when the angel's words break open our lives, and we start to run with fear and great joy. Fear and joy, the two poles, the two extremes of our human response to the awesome intimacy of God. Fear and joy run with us throughout our lives together, as constant reminders of the cost and promise of following Jesus. Fear and joy, at the centre of our longings, at the heart of our desires.

But there is a secret. It is a secret that we only glimpse at in this life. It is a secret that was first revealed to those two early risers on the first day of the week, while all creation breathed in the aroma of anticipation. It is the secret of Easter. It is a secret that I pray we will realize in the course of the year to come. It is a secret that is the climax of our gospel, a secret of the mystery of fear and joy. And the secret is this: joy wins.