

Message: "Fear's Evolution"

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 28:1-10

28After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Let's see, the most recent headlines of our time include lethal tornadoes in the south, violent protests in Israel, the indictment of our former president, 134 mass shootings to date, a continuing rise in the death toll on both sides of the Ukraine war, flooding in California, the Montana legislature presenting numerous bills aimed at compromising the health of our climate and our LGBTQ family members, saber rattling in North Korea and China, burning Amazon forests, book banning, history shunning, and Florida government at war with Disneyworld.

What's that I hear you thinking? "Wait a minute, pastor John, this is no way to start an Easter sermon!"

I would agree, but isn't it true that our minds and lives are somewhat preoccupied by how bad things are in our world right now?

These are days of all-consuming fear and heart-robbing despair. I've yet to meet someone who has not reflected on how bad things seem to be, here and around the world. It is no good denying it, the status of things these days, although there are many who are saying that things are not so bad, or that exposed scandals and deceptions are only political tools to win votes for one's side, or that the climate is not really at risk, nor are racism and prejudice really that bad.

Anyone who is paying honest attention knows better.

No, things really are bad. But not irredeemable; never irredeemable. And this is the crucial point we find ourselves in anytime we consider the entirety of

God's revelation in Christ. Things in the world can get really, really bad; but never, never irredeemable.

We must realize that we can never hope to understand the joy that is given to us without facing its opposite; for the things that make life worthwhile are made real in contrast to the things that diminish life. And it is only in such contrast that we understand fully how what is good far outweighs what is evil. All hope rests on this - that there is more good in the world than bad.

Were it left up to us as a human species, this balance would not be possible. Thank God, literally, it is not only up to us. God has intervened into human affairs to show us this truth directly. Jesus came amongst us, sharing truth and light and possibility; a new understanding of God, full of mercy and compassion, a God who insists in loving us regardless of our behavior or thinking or station in life; in fact, a God who loves us the more we find ourselves broken, disoriented, or disenfranchised. Imagine the worst of the worst happening in life - suffering, pain, estrangement, loss, violence -- the things we fear most - then consider the contrast of what the cross stands for, the love that bore it for our sakes and the love that saw things through to the end. And then, behold, it wasn't the end! Another ending, a new ending came, one that settled the score with fear; not even death is greater than God's possibility. What seemed to be the end of life on the cross was but a portal to a new, different, eternal existence that could not be destroyed by any human means; we are eternal creatures, you and I, meant for life here and now, but so very much more.

But how to live in the light of this love? How to have hope in a world that contrasts so starkly with God's will?

A few weeks ago, we were privileged to provide the venue for Faith and Climate Action Montana's speaker series; this particular night we welcomed Daniel Spencer, who is an emeritus environmental studies professor at the University of Montana. He came to share his insights into the disparaging climate realities we face in our world - he outlined quite a depressing scenario of atmospheric carbon saturation, critical temperature rise, and a much-too-weak response from the world's governments to affect sufficient change. It was a sobering talk; one couldn't help but feel concerned about the status of our world, and the lack of will for humans to change.

There was a question and answer portion at the end of the talk, where people in the audience asked Professor Spencer all kinds of questions - but one

question stood out, at least to me. The audience member asked, "Do you feel hopeful about the future of our world?" The professor took a moment to think about that question, but then answered in a way that surprised me. He said something like this: "You know, there are times when I don't have hope - I get down, I worry, and I don't see much sign of things turning around. I don't always have hope - but I do always have love. I have a loving family, I have a wonderful church community who love each other, I love people I work with who care about the environment enough to keep working to make things better. I don't always have hope, but I always have love, and that gets me through the times when my hope is gone."

I love that, for it rings so very true with what Jesus was all about. His was the example of the power of love to face the world as it is, even when it seems beyond hope. Especially when it seems beyond hope. Love persists; love cannot be destroyed; love endures even when hope seems absent. And love sees us through - beyond crosses into new life. As it was then, so is it now - and so shall it be, for all who dare to love in the manner of Christ. All crosses are shown to be temporary.