

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Easter 1-B; 1 April 2018  
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster  
(rev. 201803271548)

**Be not afraid!**

*In nomine...*

**I. Intro**

What are you afraid of?

There are many messages of Easter, but the one I want to stick with this year is the first thing Jesus' followers heard when they went to his tomb. "Be not afraid!" The time for fear has passed. There is a new season at hand.

So, what are you afraid of?

Are you afraid of death? Sickness? The dark?

Are you afraid of rejection? Failure? The copy machine?

Are you afraid of the government? Hackers? The dentist?

Are you afraid of church? Unreasonable expectations? Long sermons?

When I was growing up in the church, it was common for sermons to be 20-30 minutes long. When we had special speakers, they could go over an hour! That was kind of challenging for a young boy like myself!

Be not afraid! That is not what's going to happen today!

## **II. Mary & Mary & Salome**

Our Gospel reading today begins with fear and sorrow. Jesus' disciples were expecting great things. Jesus had led them to understand that he had a special relationship with God, and that God's power, greater than that of any worldly power, was at work in him. There was a general expectation that prophecies would come to pass, that hopes would be fulfilled, that the Kingdom of God would be established on Earth. And then, in the span of 24 hours, those hopes were dashed.

When Jesus was crucified, most of his disciples fled. The disciple with the biggest mouth, the one who bragged most loudly of his undying loyalty to Jesus, turned around and solemnly swore that he had no connection to Jesus whatsoever. Only a few disciples remained present through Jesus' final moments of life, following his body to see where it was buried. Three of these were Mary, Mary, and Salome. These women were determined to render unto their friend Jesus the service that was due any beloved person who died. They wanted to see his body cared for and respect shown for his life and his love for them.

But there were some barriers in their way. There was the Sabbath to wait through, when all the shops were closed so that they couldn't buy the supplies they needed. Then, when Sabbath ended, it did so at night, when the way to Jesus' tomb would be completely dark and dangerous. But the biggest obstacle was a literal one. A huge stone had been rolled over the mouth of Jesus' tomb. That stone was too heavy for these three women to move on their own! They were waiting and watching until the time was right and they could go. But what could they do about that stone?

## **III. Obstacles**

We each have obstacles like these in our lives: big, heavy things that block our way. Problems we're not really sure we can even do anything about on our own. We often feel helpless before them, frustrated and ashamed. Sometimes we can give those obstacles names: they are fear, anxiety, anger, or grief. They are people about whom we care but whom we find ourselves helpless to help. Sometimes those stones are harder to put our fingers on but they are there, nonetheless, shaping how we feel, how we respond to daily circumstances in our lives, and how we relate to ourselves and other people. Sometimes those stones are simply covering up even bigger things, corpses hidden away inside us, rotting and consuming us from the inside out. Corpses like addiction, shame, or unresolved conflict with someone important to us.

And here's the thing about all those obstacles: Jesus healed a few people who were born blind, and Jesus continues to do miracles in the world. But we call them miracles because they are terribly unusual. For most of us, most of those obstacles we face just aren't going to go away. They are part of the landscape of life as a human being. They define who we are as people and challenge us to grow in ways that we might not otherwise.

### **III. The Empty Tomb**

So Mary, Mary, and Salome went walking through the morning twilight strategizing between themselves how to deal with that huge stone that stood between them and their dead loved one. They found the right garden, they located the tomb, and they blinked. That huge stone was no longer standing in their way. What was going on now? Had Jesus' tomb been robbed already? To what new indignity had their loved one been subjected?

They walked into the tomb, and found a young man sitting there. He said, "April fools!"

That's a pretty loose translation from the Greek, I guess.

You could also translate it, "Be not afraid!"

The young man explained that Jesus, the very one they were searching for, had been raised from the dead, and gone ahead of them to Galilee. Their job now was to tell the other disciples, even Peter who had denied knowing Jesus and now was wallowing in his own special hell of grief and shame.

So these women had faced the obstacles they had found before them. Some they had overcome and the one that they had thought impossible turned out not to be an obstacle at all. But they weren't off the hook. They were given new tasks to do, and new obstacles as they sought to wrap their heads around this new, wholly unexpected and unbelievable new reality. They felt at once grief, wonder, joy and confusion. What was going on? How could they tell anybody anything when they themselves couldn't comprehend what was happening.

What would you do in their shoes?

#### **IV. Good News**

Our lesson today is from the very end of the original book of Mark. The women go away terrified and speechless, saying nothing to anyone. But we know that's not the end of the story. Eventually they told someone because the story got out, Mark's Gospel was written, many people believed the women's story, and the world has never been the same since.

Mary, Mary, and Salome didn't understand everything that was happening, but they didn't have to understand completely. They saw enough that they could be comfortable accepting the rest on faith. And their lives were completely transformed by this new understanding.

We, too, are invited to see with the eyes of faith what God is doing in our lives. We are invited to bear witness to the obstacles and the crosses, the stones and the corpses, that litter our lives. And then to acknowledge that God is present even in those places, and often doing something bigger than we can at first comprehend. Something so big that at first we have to live by faith as we learn to perceive.

Those obstacles in your life – maybe God intends to take some of them out of your way. Or maybe God has in mind bigger plans so that someday you will suddenly find that those obstacles you thought were so big and immovable have dwindled in significance and really don't mean much any more. Or maybe, as many of us find, those obstacles will remain with you, like the thorn in St. Paul's side, as the battlefield in which you will come to know and trust and rest in God as your companion.

Be not afraid!

Faith means walking towards the obstacles in our lives: our fear and shame and sorrow. Resurrection is the discovery that those obstacles, in the end, are not what define us. They are simply the stones that help rub away everything that is secondary and reveal the image of God in us underneath it all.

## **V. Conclusion**

Mary, Mary, and Salome were the first evangelists, the first people ever to proclaim to others, “Alleluia! The Lord is risen!” Because they were willing to face the obstacles before them, they were the first to know and the first to tell others that the world had fundamentally changed, and all the things which had caused them to fear were suddenly put into a whole different perspective! It was the best “April Fools” joke of all time!

You and I face challenges in our lives: but even the worst of these are subject to the Resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

I’m not trying to minimize your fears and concerns. I have no doubt they are real and powerful. But God is much more real, much more powerful, and doing much bigger things in your life than any of those obstacles that look so big right now.

What are *you* afraid of?

Jesus endured the cross in order to demonstrate that even our greatest fears can’t stand up to the power of God’s love.

In a post-resurrection world, there is a cry and an agenda which supersedes every other:

“Be not afraid!”

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