

April 9, 2023 Easter Sunday

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Matthew 28:1-10

"A Close Relative of Fear"

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Snakes, the dark, spiders, heights, small spaces, large crowds, for some people, public speaking, although at the rate we clergy yak at you, clearly not for us; these are all things and contexts that create fear for people. Each of us, one and all experience fear in some form or another.

"Fear is the original sin. Almost all of the evil in the world has its origin in the fact that someone is afraid of something..." according to Lucy Maud Montgomery, best known as the author of *Anne of Green Gables*. "Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world." writes Ralph Waldo Emerson. But we do not need these fancy writers to tell us that fear is something we wish to avoid. Fear can limit our lives in countless ways.

Why all this talk of fear on this Easter Sunday??? Well, you would have to blame Matthew for that. His account of the resurrection is laced with fear from beginning to end. We are given an earthquake. And then an angel of the Lord arrives, whose very appearance makes the guards shake and become like dead men. The angel tells the women to not be afraid. The announcement that Jesus is raised from the dead fills them with great joy, but also fear. As they rush to tell the other disciples, the risen from the dead Jesus meets them. He too, tells them to not be afraid, which is a sure sign that they are indeed afraid.

Easter is the ultimate good news day. We put on our prettiest clothing. We pull out all of the major chords in our hymns and anthems. Let the brass and timpani reign. Jesus is risen from the dead and alive once more. All sounds good to me. So why all of the fear on that first Easter Sunday? When death is defeated the entire world is turned upside down. Everything is changed.

As much we like to claim we believe in change, we all know, deep down that fear of change is real. The fear of change, metathesiophobia, is a phobia that causes people to avoid changing their circumstances due to being extremely afraid of the unknown. Neuroscience has shown that uncertainty feels similar to failure in our brains. When you think the world works a certain way and then discover there are an entirely new set of rules it can be scary.

In the New Testament, time and again, the disciples experience fear when they are exposed to the power of God writ large before them, such as when Jesus calms the storm on the lake. They had no idea they could be so close to the world-transforming power of the divine, and that reality puts everything up for grabs.

This morning we sit here a few steps removed from that power of God writ large before us. Those women were brought face to face with that immense power at the empty tomb, and then before Jesus, actually risen from the dead before them. We do not gather in fear. We gather in celebration. But I worry that gathering solely in celebration does a disservice to this day and to ourselves. These days we need more than a pleasant ritual. I am not suggesting we should gather together in fear

this morning. But I do wish we could gather together with a close relative of fear, awe.

The Greek word for fear used in this text and much of the New Testament comes with a sense of being brought in close contact with a power that is beyond our comprehension. I do wonder if what was being conveyed to those women at the tomb from the angel and from Jesus was not solely, "Do not be afraid," but "Do not be afraid, be in awe."

Unfortunately, in our current world we have far too much fear and not nearly enough awe. They are so close and yet so different from each other. Both can give us goosebumps, but one makes us shrink up in an effort to protect ourselves and the other opens us up to wider vistas than we previously thought possible.

Dr. Dacher Keltner writes that "Awe is the emotion we experience when we encounter vast mysteries we don't understand." (Kelter, p. XVI) To me that sounds like an antidote to much of what ails us these days. We find ourselves living in the midst of a world of unknowns brought on by numerous upheavals in geopolitics, society, and climate. And our response to all of this has been twofold. Fear of what the future may bring, and entrenched opinions and worldviews that come with stubborn certainties that smother possibilities.

Our obsession with the world's unknowns is choking out our appreciation for the larger mysteries of existence. We are so busy being fearful, or angry, or self-justified by what we believe we know to be true that there is no room for awe within us. All too often we find ourselves like a tightly clenched fist, closing upon ourselves in an effort at self-preservation.

Awe expands our sense of self and our connection to all that surrounds us, both physical and metaphysical.

We run a risk these days. We run the risk of living lives that are shaped by fear. What we need to be doing is living lives that are shaped by awe. We know the choice those women made. If they had left that tomb and hid in fear we would not be gathered here this morning. We are here this morning because those first followers of Jesus chose to have awe guide their lives rather than fear.

There is no doubt that the world is a big, scary place at times. There is so much that is beyond our personal control; so many powerful forces that could harm us. But today is the day we are reminded that for all of things in this world that are more powerful than you or me, there is one thing that is most powerful of all.

That earthquake in Matthew is nothing compared to what we are talking about. God's love for us is more powerful than all our personal failings, our sins are forgiven. God's love for us is more powerful than whatever forces threaten our ephemeral circumstances, our destiny is assured. God's love for us is more powerful than death, God's love in the form of everlasting life is the final word for all of us. How can we not be in awe of that?

There is no way to eliminate fear from our lives. But we can turn to the antidote of awe to put our fears in perspective. If we approach this morning as solely a pleasant celebration of spring, on par with enjoying the arrival of daffodils and warmer days, we can enjoy the moment. But it is a rather thin gruel to sustain us through the fearful challenges of this life. However, we could think about this Easter morning as a window by which we

can catch a glimpse of the immense mystery of a God so truly awesome and deeply loving that death has been conquered for us. The recognition of this reality can feed us every day of our lives.

Here is the thing about both awe and fear, they are contagious. Fearful moments create neural pathways that invite more and more fearful moments. And moments of awe open us up to experiencing more and more moments of awe. Recognizing the awesome power of God in the resurrection opens us up to experiencing awe in nature; experiencing awe in music, and all forms of art; and most importantly experiencing awe in those moments when those around us reveal the beauty and generosity within themselves.

Aldous Huxley wrote, "What exactly vanishes during awe?...the interfering neurotic who, in waking hours, tries to run the show." (p. 32) I cannot pretend I have not seen that face in the mirror, the interfering neurotic, on more than one occasion. And that face possesses fear because there are so many things more powerful than me that do not let me run the show. But Dacher Keltner notes "that when we experience awe, regions of the brain that are associated with the excesses of the ego, including self-criticism, anxiety, and even depression, quiet down" (p. 36) And I would add fear to that list.

Now you may have noticed that I have been rambling on for a while now and have not made a single attempt to explain the resurrection this morning; how anything about Jesus being raised from the dead makes any sense at all. I do not think this morning is about seeking those answers. This morning is about gathering around this holy mystery and allowing ourselves to experience awe; being in awe that something as powerful as death

can be defeated; being in awe that God offers us, one and all, this transcendent and transforming gift; being in awe that we are loved that very much by the creator of the universe.

This morning is about welcoming awe into our lives for all God has done for us and thus inviting the experience of awe in the midst of all of our days.

A life of fear, or a life of awe, the choice is ours.

Thanks be to God.

Keltner, Dacher, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* Penguin Press, New York, 2023.