

“Easter Courage”

Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20

Courage – the state or quality of mind or spirit that enables one to face danger with self-possession, confidence and resolution.



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When I look at the people who experienced the first Easter, I don't just see shock and amazement, I see courage. And the ones I see the most courage in are the women. For the gospels are agreed that the first to the tomb and the first to bear witness to the risen Christ were women.

The first point of courage is that the women were going to the tomb at all. This is the courage of love. It's worth remembering that the followers of Jesus were marked. The eleven disciples were holed up in a room somewhere. When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb, they were going to anoint the wrappings around his body. It took several treatments until the wrappings became a solid cocoon. The tomb belonged to Jesus' good friend Joseph of Arimathea. They had watched him roll the big stone in front, so they assumed that the two of them could roll it aside. What they had not counted on was the Roman seal – the reinforcement of the stone and then a 24-hour guard placed there. They still approach the tomb, for these are women with the courage of love. I wonder if there was any conversation as they asked why all that was so necessary. Whatever was said, it was interrupted by an “earthquake,” what Dale Bruner calls a “manquake.”

The scene that follows is humorous. The angel of the Lord comes down from heaven, rolls back the stone and sits on it. He is awesome and glowing like lightning. The angel is the new guard, now, and the rough, well-trained guards end up passed out in fear. It's interesting how they were there to make sure Jesus stayed dead in the minds of his followers, and they end up mortified. Then the angel says to the women what angels always say in the Bible, “Fear not.” He may have feared the ladies would pass out, too. They are about to learn the power of perfect love, that perfect love that casts out fear.

The angel says, “I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.” He could have said, “I know that you have come to pay tribute, to remember, and grieve for what might have been. You have come to care for the dead. But he is not here. He is risen, just as he said. Come see where he lay.” I invite you to notice something here. The stone was not rolled away to let Jesus out. He didn't need that. His glorified body could go through doors and walls, something the disciples would later discover. The stone was rolled away to let the women in, to let the women see for themselves that which would change their lives forever.

That brings us to the second point of courage for these women, namely the courage to believe the unbelievable and act on it. The angel tells them to go tell the disciples that Jesus has risen, and will meet them all in Galilee. The women will see him there as well. Think about that. They have seen a horror that they will never be able to get out of their minds: the one they loved beaten beyond recognition, crucified, and then stabbed with a spear for good measure. Now they are going to tell the disciples that Jesus has risen. It's absurd. And we know from John's gospel that the disciples thought the women were out of their minds in grief. Matthew says that the women were filled with both fear and joy as they hurriedly went to tell the disciples. But they went, and as they put feet and action to their faith, Jesus met them on the

way. Isn't that just like Jesus? He would say to the leper, "Stretch out your hand?" He would say to the crippled man, "Pick up your bed." He tells them, "Go tell the disciples, even though they'll think you're nuts." And as they do, they meet Jesus.

Many people, even today, claim to believe the unbelievable, that Jesus has risen from the dead and will even tell you that he lives in their hearts. But they have never acted on it. They have never put their lives on the line and lived in full trust of God. They trust themselves more and they limit their lives to what they can do on their own. In our day and time, it is harder to act on the unbelievable than ever. Everything is so cause and effect – push a button and the desired product comes your way. We live in an input-output world. Many sincere Christians have never come to grips with the empty tomb. They follow a Jesus who showed the world a better way to live who is worthy of our following, but they have never experienced the power of Christ that takes them beyond themselves.

They have dared to believe and acted on it. Now they meet Jesus. What a rush that must have been. It's still a rush to meet Jesus. But the greatest act of courage is yet to come. The women do tell the disciples and it is no easy sell. The disciples do go to Galilee and they do meet Jesus there. Some believed and some doubted. So it will always be with the risen Christ, believers and doubters. Which are you, not just in what you say, but in how you live your life? But here is where ultimate courage comes in. Life will be tragic if Jesus is dead, but it will be easier. A dead Christ is easier to serve than a risen one. But if he is alive, then you have to face who you have been – betrayers, deniers and cowards. It takes courage to face your failures and begin again. It's easier just to quit and quit on those around you. But the risen Christ will not allow it, not in them and not in us. Jesus builds his kingdom on freaks, flops and flakes. I picture something like an Uncle Sam poster that reads, "All Freaks, Flops and Flakes" with Jesus' picture on it saying "I Want You." That's what Jesus was telling us on the cross. On the cross Jesus became the freak, a nut case who thought he could build his own kingdom. On the cross, Jesus became a flop, a failure for everyone to see. On the cross, Jesus became a flake who claimed to save others but couldn't save himself. And then he resurrected, offering a new beginning for each of us. Hear me, the empty tomb says to all betrayers, deniers, cowards, doubters, sinners, and losers, "It's not over." The question is, "Are we willing to trust the risen Christ, get back up and start over?"

If we are, then Jesus says, "It's time to tell the world." That's the fourth act of courage, to take his act on the road and invite the world to follow. Now the courage is not just for individuals. It's about being the courageous body of the risen Christ.

It was May Day, 1990. The place, Moscow's Red Square. "Is it straight, Father?" one Orthodox priest asked another, shifting the heavy, eight-foot crucifix on his shoulder. "Yes," said the other. "It is straight." Together the two priests, along with a group of parishioners holding ropes that steadied the beams of the huge cross, walked the parade route. Before them was passed the official might of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: The usual May Day procession of tanks, missiles, troops, and salutes to the Communist party elite. Behind the tanks surged a giant crowd of protesters, shouting up at Mikhail Gorbachev. "Bread!...Freedom!...Truth!"

As the throng passed directly in front of the Soviet leader standing in his place of honor, the priests hoisted their heavy burden toward the sky. The cross emerged from the crowd. As it did, the figure of Jesus Christ obscured the giant poster faces of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin that provided the backdrop for Gorbachev's reviewing stand. "Mikhail Sergeyeovich!" one of the priests shouted, his deep voice cleaving the clamor of the protesters and piercing straight toward the angry Soviet leader. "Mikhail Sergeyeovich! Christ is risen!" (Charles W. Colson, The Body, 1992, Word Publishing, p. 231).

One of the things you and I are called to do is lift the cross above all that belittles, divides, dehumanizes,

exploits, demeans, deprives, destroys and kills. It happens in our families, our neighborhoods, and among our friends. It happens in our workplaces and in our politics. The only way the world knows that Christ is risen is when those in whom he is risen show up and make their voices heard and their lives seen. It takes courage. It takes Easter courage. And when we live in that courage, he will be with us always. Freaks, flops and flakes changing the world, for the risen Christ is with us, in us and is working through us. Thanks be to God, Amen.