

“Easter in an Age of Fear”
Easter Sermon 2017
First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
April 16, 2017
(Mk. 16:1-8; Rm. 8:28, 35, 37-39)

Introduction.

When I say the words “9/11,” “The Shootings in Orlando,” “Mother Immanuel Church in Charleston,” or “ISIS,” what words or images come to your mind? Do the words “terror,” “hate,” and “fear” surface when you think of the tragic events associated with these images. You and I live in an age of fear, don’t we? There is a lot going on in the world that makes us afraid. Just last Sunday, Palm Sunday, one of the highest holy days in the Christian calendar, two bombs exploded in Coptic churches in Egypt which killed 45 people and injured 125 more. There are reasons to be afraid in the world today.

I read an excerpt from a book by Gregg Easterbrook in *Time* magazine¹ a while ago which tried to examine the question: if life is so good then why do the old days look better? The title of his book is *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. One of the theories discussed in the book is what is called “collapse anxiety.”

Collapse anxiety is the deep-seated fear that we cannot sustain the standard of living and the liberty we currently enjoy. We fear the economy will collapse, or our natural resources will run out. We fear that our military superiority will be neutralized by some bio-horror, or that terrorism or an environmental catastrophe will overwhelm us. Some of these concerns are rational and real, and they keep us on our guard. But at some point it crosses the line, and we become paralyzed by the fear. That’s collapse anxiety.

A number of years ago, I was in Washington, DC, just after the sniper who had been terrorizing that metropolitan area was caught. I attended a dinner party with some friends who lived there, and I asked them, “How did it affect your daily routines, and how did you cope with your fear of the sniper?” Various people related how they changed the way they dropped their kids off at school or their shopping habits to avoid areas where the shootings had taken place. One man shared that whenever he filled up his car with gas, he never stood still but kept bobbing and weaving, checking things around the car so as to not give a steady target to a sniper. They all expressed relief that the man had been caught, but few said life would get back to normal anytime soon.

Today we're celebrating Easter, and we're doing it in an age of fear. But fear in the world is nothing new. It has been around since the dawn of time, and it was very evident when Jesus walked the earth 2000 years ago. The little country in which He lived in the 1st century AD was a conquered nation, and the Roman Empire was in total control. In order to maintain its oppressive rule, Rome meted out execution by crucifixion to punish law-breakers and serve as a warning against anyone who was contemplating a crime against the state. Few rituals were as cruel or brutal as Roman crucifixion, and it struck fear into the hearts of millions.

However, something else caused fear to grip the followers of Jesus that first Easter morning, and that's what I'd like us to take a look at today. It was a different kind of fear that seized their hearts than the fear of the Roman Empire. We read in Mark 16 that when the women went to the tomb to finish the process of burial, they were *alarmed* when confronted by an angel of the Lord with the news that Jesus had risen from the dead. Our text tells us that they were *trembling* and *bewildered* at the report, and they fled from the tomb because they were *afraid*. But the fear they experienced that Easter morning was a very different kind of fear. It was a *holy fear*, and they wondered what it all meant. The empty tomb and the message of the angel gave them hope, and the holy fear of the resurrection overcame all their other fears. Let's take a closer look.

*

In the Apostles' Creed we say the words, "I believe in Jesus Christ [God's] only Son, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." Those last few words slip off our tongues so quickly and easily most Sundays. But I think we should slow down, especially today, and remember just what it took for Jesus to provide a ransom for our souls. "He...suffered under Pontius Pilate...He was crucified...He was dead...and He was buried." For you and for me!

However, the Creed goes on to affirm "He descended into hell." Now what exactly does that phrase really mean? John Calvin believed Jesus went to hell as a helpless victim in order to experience on our behalf the ultimate suffering, degradation, and humiliation of humanity. However, Martin Luther had another take on it. He believed that Jesus went into hell endowed with the power to rescue, and He went there to invade enemy territory. I think they're both right.

There is a medieval painting called "The Harrowing of Hell" which depicts the moment in Ephesians where it says, "*Jesus descended to the lower parts to lead out a train of captives*" (4:9). The painting shows Jesus just as He has broken out of the gates of hell. With one hand He frees Adam, and with the other He frees Eve. Beneath His feet is Satan, bound, gagged and immobilized. The actions of

Satan and his terrorist cronies are the desperate acts of a defeated foe. Why? Because Jesus is a Savior who has been to hell and back for you and me!

Whenever something bad happens in the world which causes us to be afraid, we need to remember this biblical truth. It's a promise that God who is in us is stronger than the devil who is in the world. We don't need to fear Satan or any of his cronies of terror. He's a dog on a leash who has been defeated by Christ the conqueror.

There is nothing that you and I have to fear as long as we trust that God is in control. No matter what happens in this life, and no matter how bad it may be, evil and terror will never have the last word. That's a promise in the Bible you can count on, and I'm clinging to that promise more tightly than ever before this Easter because of all that has happened in my life this past year.

This morning we've read in Romans 8 that God works all things together for the good of those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose. There is nothing in all creation that can separate you from God's love, and in Jesus Christ you are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

Martin Luther echoed this truth when he wrote these powerful words in his great hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*:

And though this world, with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.

And that little word is the name of Jesus!

I have a friend whose father was a fireman. He was a captain in the fire department of his hometown in Riverside, California. When my friend was a boy, his father often smelled of smoke when he came home from work. One time he fell through a roof in an attempt to rescue someone, and his uniform caught on fire. My friend says, "Isn't it interesting, when terror comes our way, when the bottom falls out in life, we don't call on celebrities or athletes or the wealthy people in our society to help us. When the bottom falls out of life, we call on faithful, hard-working firemen to help, just like we did on September 11. They are the quiet heroes who come to the rescue; they're the ones who stand in the gap."

I would suggest that Jesus Christ was a firefighter of heavenly proportions who went through the flames of hell itself for you and me, and He gave His life in the

rescue. Jesus told His disciples, “*Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13). Our Lord demonstrated that sacrificial love when He hung between heaven and earth and died in our place to secure our salvation. And it’s because of His victorious resurrection that we now have a message of hope to share and a ministry of release to provide people who are captive to fear.

*

Have you ever noticed how difficult times and great tragedy often lay your heart open to God in new ways? They’re a means by which we come face to face with the great questions of life, our limitations as humans to control things, as well as our greatest fears. Your parents’ divorce, you learn you have cancer, a loved one dies, you lose your job, you flunk out of school, or you have a miscarriage, and all of a sudden your world falls apart, you stop dead in your tracks, and you try to make sense of it all.

When big problems hit your world, it’s hard for life to go back to normal. And that’s okay, because life shouldn’t go back to normal. Instead, the awful things that happen in our lives should take us straight to the arms of God. Sometimes God shows up most right in the middle of our worst fears. A few weeks ago, Bryan Dunagan who preached at our church reminded us what Dallas Willard once said. He said, “God’s address is at the end of your rope.” Have you discovered that to be true in your life?

Do you remember what happened after 9/11 in this country? People flocked to church seeking God, and no one complained about prayers being offered in public places. We all knew we needed God’s help. The tragedy rocked our world, and it took us to our knees.

Fear can serve as a wake-up call for the world, but it can also be a wake-up call for the Church. That first Easter morning, the angel of the Lord told the frightened women to do something. They were to go and tell Jesus’ disciples that Christ had risen from the dead, just as He said He would, and that He would meet up with them in Galilee.

Later on when Jesus appeared to them, He explained to His disciples the purpose of His death. And He gave them a mandate to go into all the world with the transforming power of His message of love and to be ambassadors and examples of His kingdom (Mt. 28:16-20). They were to be heralds of His good news and agents of change to turn the world upside down. The good news of Easter would overcome the fear of the world.

It’s only when we really believe in the resurrection that we’re able to do what Jesus called us to do, get out of our comfort zones, and enter the hellish places of this world in His name. And it’s because of the transforming power of the Holy

Spirit that you and I can push past our fears and become the hands and feet of Jesus. Every crisis, every occasion of suffering, and every terror we experience is an opportunity for God to break into our crazy lives and into this crazy world in order for the Church to give itself away in the service of others.

Go to the places where the Church is most authentically giving itself away, and there you will find people who believe in the power of the resurrection to change lives and to change the world. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about.

A number of years ago, I went to Princeton, New Jersey, on church business, and while I was there I made a trip to New York City and Ground Zero, the place where the World Trade Center once stood. This was before the building was rebuilt and the memorial erected, and you could still see the vast damage done to the area. It was a very moving experience for me to read the displays about the buildings, the attack on 9/11, and the lives that were lost. Little shrines and memorials were still set out to honor the fallen – both for the victims and those who died in the rescue efforts. It is a massive area, and at that time work was continuing to repair neighboring buildings that were damaged by the attack.

I also visited St. Paul's Chapel just a block away. It served as a place of rest and refuge for recovery workers at the site, and for eight months, hundreds of volunteers worked 12 hour shifts around the clock, serving meals, making beds, counseling and praying with the rescue workers. Massage therapists, chiropractors and musicians also tended to the needs of anyone. It was an amazing display of sacrifice and service.

The church, which was built in 1766, is the oldest public building in continuous use on the island of Manhattan. This was George Washington's church, and it contains his pew. It was here that he worshiped immediately following his Inauguration as the first President of the United States on April 30, 1789. There's a small graveyard directly behind the church that goes back to the Revolutionary War, and it still had some of the debris in it that was blown out of the World Trade Center buildings. Miraculously, all the buildings around the church were destroyed, but not one of the windows in St. Paul's was even broken.

During the months of rescue efforts after September 11, police officers lined the wooden pews of the more than 200-year-old chapel, and firefighters in full rescue gear walked up and down the aisles. I noticed that the pews were all scuffed up, and the paint was chipped everywhere. Deep gouges had been cut into the wood from all the gear the workers were wearing back then.

At first, I wondered why no one had taken the time to repaint them. Then it hit me. They were left that way on purpose. It was a testimony that the Church is called to be out on the front lines of rescue whenever terror hits the world. She

may get scuffed up a bit in the process, but what is that in terms of the value of saving souls and rescuing lives?

Later on I read that just before the attack of 9/11, a new pastor had been called to the chapel. Prior to his arrival, some consideration had been given by the Episcopal diocese to close down the ministry of the church. But it was thought that with a new pastor and new vision perhaps they could find a new reason for being. The pastor had prayed that God would help them take the focus off their struggle to survive and give them a new burden for mission to reach out to the world. Little did he know how God would answer his prayer.

Conclusion.

Easter reminds us that we overcome fear in our lives with the hope of the resurrection. And every time we read of a terrorist attack, or a school yard shooting, or the rape of a young coed, or a hate crime against gay people, or reactionary prejudice against Muslims and people of Arabic descent, then our hearts should grieve at the presence of evil in this world. And we should seek to overcome the fear and the terror we feel with the hope of the Gospel. Easter reminds us that evil never has the last word, and God always has another move He can make. The Lord can take the worst things humanity can do in this world, and He can work a miracle of hope. That is the promise of the empty tomb, and it's a promise to which I cling today.

N.T. Wright has written, "The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won. If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense—[then] it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my personal spiritual life. But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world—news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts. Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things—and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement the victory of Jesus over them all."²

Friends, let's take this message of Easter into our broken world – a world that is filled with fear. And let's overcome the fear we may feel today with the hope that is in Christ. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Thanks be to God!

¹ Book excerpt from *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, by Gregg Easterbrook in *Time*, December 15, 2003, pp. 66, 67.

² N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church*, pp. 65-66.