

East Hartford  
Easter 2014

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Jer 31:1-6, Matt 28: 1-10

### Are You Kidding???

Friends, what is your gut level reaction whenever somebody tells you not to be afraid?

Place yourselves into this story. Imagine that you are walking with Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” round about sunrise. There is an earthquake, the stone is rolled back, an angel is perched on the stone, white robes and all. The guards are shaking with fear and speechless. Then you hear the angels say, “don’t be afraid.”

Are you kidding?

Imagine that you hear the angel’s directives, “Come and see. Go and tell the disciples, ‘Jesus has been raised and is headed for Galilee. He’ll meet you there.’”

The three of you, you together with Mary of Magdala, and the other Mary, leave the cemetery - your heart is pounding with - pounding with what ?

Your heart is pounding with fear and confusion and joy and fear and hope and ... suddenly you see Jesus, who says, “Hi there!” You give him a hug! Then you hear him say, “Don’t be afraid.”

Yeah right! Are you kidding me????

Friends, I don’t know about you - but there is nothing that can terrify me more than stepping into a totally new nerve-wracking situation, then someone says, “Don’t be afraid.” That phrase, “Don’t be afraid” or its first cousin, “Don’t worry” is almost guaranteed to raise me to new heights of terror. Furthermore, I consider my terror to be a sign of my good common sense and sanity. Just hang on to that for a moment.

Now, Friends, I invite you to take a look, a long loving look at the quote from Clarence Jordan that is at the top of your bulletins.

Clarence Jordan said, “The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church.”

Beginning next Sunday, we will be hearing several stories from the first churches - not First Church East Hartford, but the first church in Jerusalem and other churches of the first century following the resurrection. You remember, I'm sure, the story of Stephen who was stoned to death, with Saul/Paul looking on and giving consent.

Christians and churches had something serious to fear. **Persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, execution.** Yet the movement grew from a small group of terrified disciples hidden behind locked doors in Jerusalem to churches throughout the eastern Mediterranean world, to Ethiopia, to India, Italy, Spain, and more. Twelve became thousands and hundreds of thousands, most of whom had never met the living Jesus or witnessed the Risen Christ. *They were carried-away churches filled with transformed disciples forming spirit-filled fellowships.*

Why did this happen? How did it happen?

I believe it is happening (hear the present tense) I believe it **is** happening still happening now in the spirit and in the power of the Easter message, **namely that Love is victory over death.**

Now I don't know exactly what happened on that first Easter and neither does anyone else living today. There were no eyewitnesses. We have four different stories, all of which were written between a quarter and a half century after the crucifixion, all of which differ from each

other. **The fact is**, we don't need the facts and details any more than the first century faithful did.

What we do know is that after Jesus was crucified, the church happened.

What we do know is that the church is today.

What we do know is that the church –  
for all of its faults and failures,  
In its growth here and its shrinking there,  
for all of its sin and its goodness,  
for all of its fumbling and faithfulness,  
For all of its whatever;

What we do know is that the church lives today and is thus the living evidence of the resurrection.

What we do know is that love is the ultimate victor over death or better put, Love wins, Love is winning.

What we do know is that as love wins, there is nothing to fear, - for when suffering comes and it does for all of us,  
when mystery happens and when understanding happens;  
when loss happens, and when goodness happens;  
when sadness and disappointment happen, and when joy and fulfillment happen;  
when loneliness and when companionship happen,  
when death happens, and when new life happens;  
all of creation, all of us, all of it is held safely in the embrace of God.

The angels were right - they are not kidding and neither was Jesus. Be not afraid for love is winning, all are safely held in the embrace of God.

That means we can be confident, bold, brave in our loving. We can love the discards and the unlovable. We can walk in way of courageous love which welcomes all, which advocates for and protects the vulnerable, the poor and the excluded,

which is outrageously generous,  
which pours itself out to create justice and make peace.

Remember these words of Clarence Jordan,  
“The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb,  
but the full hearts of his transformed disciples.

The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a  
spirit-filled fellowship.

Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church.”

In love and through love, - we are the living evidence of the resurrection.

Christ is risen - Christ is risen in us.