

Sermon *Do Not Be Afraid*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 4.5.26

Acts 10:34-43
Colossians 3:1-4
Matthew 28:1-10
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

I have a question for you. Think of the decisions you've made in your life – the good ones and the ones you wish you had made differently. With the good decisions you've made in life, did they happen when you were feeling centered, confident, with courage, and at peace? Do you ever get the sense of just knowing? You just know what the right thing is to do. Conversely, the worst decisions I've made in my life have been out of anxiety and fear when I'm not feeling who I am.

When the Bible repeats something, it's a good idea is to pay attention to what it's repeating. Did you hear a repeating theme today in our gospel lesson? If not, I printed up little cards. It looks like Gulf of Mexico with the inscription on the sand; it says, "Do not be afraid." Whether it's a decision you have coming up, or concern about your health or the health of a nation, God is telling us first to not be afraid.

In today's Gospel lesson, an angel descends, there's an earthquake, and he moves the stone that blocked the entrance into the tomb where they placed Jesus's body. The angel has clothes that look like lightning and he sat on the rock that he rolled back. By sitting on it, it means he owns it. That means I moved it. It's mine. I did this. An angel from the unseen realm showed up. The first thing the angel said was, "*Do not be afraid.*"

The first thing that Jesus said in his resurrected form was, *do not be afraid*. More than 500 times, the Bible says: do not be afraid. But, when trouble arises, what's the first thing that we do? Become afraid. It's in our nature. It's natural for us to do this. It's a part of the way that we've learned over the millennia to defend ourselves is to have a level of anxiety and to be afraid about things. But at the same time, God is also saying do not be afraid.

It is from the unseen realm that we are being told not to be afraid. There are some that are afraid of talking about the unseen realm because we live in a physical realm. We live in a physical world, and we live right now in a rational scientific way, logic way of thinking about things. When we hear about the unseen world, it feels strange to us. And then if we happen to see something from the unseen world, we have this fear of not telling others because we might look a little crazy.

A rabbi friend of mine had said, "The ten commandments are great. But there's one commandment that supersedes all of them." And I said, "Oh, like love God." No. The greatest commandment that oversees all of them is this: *What will the neighbors think?!*

We get fearful about sharing. And so we have in our gospel lesson two stories of what happened with somebody with fear. The guards who were there who acted like dead men and then the women who ran off. They had fear and joy. They felt fear but they went off and did what they

did. And had they not done that, would you be here today? Had they not shared what they saw, had they not acted with courage, I don't think any of us would be gathered here today uh with joy and expectation in our hearts. Thanks be to God they acted, with fear and joy, and told others.

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If I can talk briefly about the unseen realm. Uh we had a good Friday service where a couple of strange things happened. There are some of us here who were witnessing this. The first is my son Elijah who is operating the camera; he was here on Good Friday. He noticed that this door to your right it started to open. Now what is amazing about this the miracle of the unseen realm is that he knew people in here for Good Friday wanted solemnity and quiet. What was happening on the other side of that door was a lot of excitement because we were getting ready for a service and putting it together (and being anything but solemn and quiet). That's an important door; through that door all of the things behind me all of what we call the holy hardware the flowers all of that comes through that door. We keep it closed to keep the light and the sound away from where people are praying and contemplating the acts of our Lord and the passion.

Elijah found me and said, "Should I go close it?" And I said, "Yeah, that would be great." So as he walked closer to the door, it kept opening more and more. And so he got there and he quietly pulled it, but didn't want to latch it because that makes a clicking sound. Yet while he stood there, the door continued to open. He then he closed it and latched it.

And in case you're wondering, it does not open by itself generally. There was some force pressing upon it that wanted to keep it open. We've witnessed this. We have seen that, once in a while, the spirit will be moving and that door likes to open by itself. This is the Lord's house. This is where the Lord has a residence. So God can do whatever God wants to do.

So that that's enough, right? But there's more things that happened to us. For Good Friday, I started the service in the back of the church and I read the Ten Commandments, slowly, and I processed forward. I had asked our music director, David Stassy, to toll the outdoor bell once for every commandment. (There is a control where we can actually control the carillon from the organ bench) Before the service, we practiced it. We went through at least five commands and it worked each time. By the way, he's really good at pressing buttons and making sound, right? That that's kind of his thing.

At noon, we sang our opening hymn, and then I stood at the back and said, "Here the commandments of our LORD: You will have no other god but me." I waiting for the bell but there was... Nothing. I went on: You will not make yourself an idol. Nothing. Although I do hear a bit of a sound and it's a clicking sound. I can tell he's pressing on it and it wasn't working.

A little while later, I was reading the passion reading. I didn't notice this but others that have watched and those that have watched online have said this that the sunlight in the church turned dark in the in the passion reading. When Jesus said *it is finished* I'm trained to pause with intentional silence. Just then a cloud came over the sun and it became very dark in here. Then, as I reading the rest of the passion which ends with the centurion saying *truly this man was God's son* the sun came back. Someone had said after the service that's a really neat power that you have. It's not my power at all.

So if that's not enough, the service ends with me kneeling and offering a solemn prayer asking that God place the grace and forgiveness of Lord Jesus Christ between God's judgment and our souls. It's a heavy prayer. I pray that while kneeling and then, when the prayer is over, I get up and simply process out in silence. There's no processional music. It's just very very quiet.

This time, however, I prayed the prayer and I got up and I took one step and then outdoor bell rang once – **dong!** As I processed out, I was thinking, *David Stasney that was awesome*. After the service is over, I came up to David and I said, "Nice improvisation. I liked that." And David said, "I didn't touch it. It rang, all by itself, at the right time."

And if that's not enough, so this morning it was dark and but I could not get here before my parish administrator Linn. When I walked into the office, she had a little story to tell: when she got here at o-dark-thirty, there was a candlelight that was illuminating in my office. It then moved into the parish hall. She looked for my car but I was not here. There's no other car here. She knew she was here by herself. She opened the church first and then the office. When I arrived, she asked that we go look in the parish hall to make sure there wasn't a flame or something going on. And, if you can guess by now with the stories, there was nothing visible going on.

Linn asked, "What is this light?" And I said, "I have seen it before." Once in a while, not every time, at night when everything's really dark, there is a light that looks like a candle. It's moving and it's here. It is the unseen realm that is entering into our physical world.

And I think 2,000 years ago it was easier for them to embrace it than it is for us in the 21st century. We are rational. We have scientific models and ideas. We like to think that things make sense. We like to experiment and then have it redone and redone and then we can prove it. And I and I think over the last hundred years or so, the Church itself has been bowing under its weight of rationality of trying to prove what cannot be proven. Trying to prove The Mystery. Trying to prove that which requires faith – that there is an unseen realm and that in that realm is God and angels and they love us and they're guiding us and they're protecting us. We are outside of that realm, in the physical realm. But once in a while, what some have referred to the finger of God, reaches down, like into a pool of water which is our lives, and just touches us. Once in a while we get this sense of the holy. It is probably harder now for us in North America to accept it and to talk about it because *what would the neighbors think* if I started talking about when I when I pray in front of an icon and I felt as if the presence of the Lord is there. Or when I when I read Scripture and I feel like God is talking directly to me. Or when we sing at church and suddenly I feel like all of humanity is One. Or when we have these dreams...

Am I crazy? That's what I get a lot from folks who have shared with me their experience with the unseen realm. I often say: Maybe, but no more crazy than the rest of us. So, it is the unseen realm touching our physical world. Their message to us is *to not be afraid*. The first thing that they tell us is don't be afraid. From those that have experienced near-death experiences where a loved one that they see who has died and then they experience them, the first thing their loved one tells them is don't be afraid. Then they get a sense of love and of peace.

Back to our Gospel lesson, they saw an angel who looked like he was wearing clothes made out of lightning and there was an earthquake and he said, "Do not be afraid. Jesus is risen. Come and see. See for yourselves. He's not here." And then the angel said to go to Galilee. That's where you will see him again. And then Jesus appeared and said, "Greetings." and they fell down and he said *do not be afraid*. All of that happened I believe in the spring of the year 0032. And it is now the spring of 2026. So it has been 1,994 years since this event occurred. What have we done as a reaction to not be afraid?

What the Church has done is established a way of not being afraid together. The first thing we do is community. In the last 1,994 years, we have gathered together in community and houses of prayer, in people's homes, in large cathedrals and outdoor settings. All different types of places we have gathered together in community to share with one another our fears and our hopes and our joys and our griefs and our expectations to be able to share those things with each other. The first step of not being afraid is to have community where you have this ability to share and to hear with one another.

The second thing we have established in the last 1994 years is that when we gather together in community, we experience conversion. And conversion isn't what you would see in a movie where the preacher puts his hand on the head and shouts: you are saved! It's not that. I mean, it can be, but for most of us, especially in the Episcopal church, conversion is a daily thing that at some point down the road will be noticeable; like when you get angry, you pause for a moment before reacting. That's a conversion from how you used to act to how you act now. Another way is that conversion makes it easier to forgive others. You find it easier to be loved. You see things in others that sometimes they themselves cannot see. All of that is conversion. It happens in community and being a part of a daily practice of becoming in touch with God and within ourselves.

It's not that you feel conversion and then you go find a community. It is that you first are in community and then you feel conversion with one another. And with conversion comes courage. Let me be clear, courage doesn't mean you don't have fear, or feel scared; courage helps you act in love even with fear. Courage is acting in faith – even when a part of you is scared to do so.

And so for us to live into the words of *do not be afraid*, which is not a command, it's a reassurance. Be not afraid to live in that we can do this through community. And within community, we find conversion with one another. And with that conversion, we find courage.

There is a lot of fear out there. The angels must be tired of saying do not be afraid. Once in a while the unseen world pops into our reality. But even if we don't see the unseen realm, they are still there guiding us and helping us. The Lord wants us to live without fear and will send the holy angels to guide us and help us make good decisions. The Lord doesn't want us to live in fear so we have the established Church which is a community, where we experience conversion, and where we find our inner courage to live and love as we have been given. In this community, we are surrounded by others who, although they too have fear from time to time, have learned courage because of the joy and the peace that Jesus gave us in his resurrection. Do not be afraid. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.