

Year A Easter Running the Hallway of Hope Matthew 28 vv1 to 10

On the first day of the week – which is today, Sunday – Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (perhaps Jesus' mother) are headed to the tomb to keep vigil. Jesus is dead and they desire to be as close to him as is now possible – a few feet away from his lifeless body, on the other side of a large stone. They are on their way to grieve his death but what they experience changes everything.

Matthew goes big in his description of what those women experience. Matthew makes it abundantly clear that God's power is at work. The women feel the ground shake as an angel descends, rolls back the huge stone, and sits on it. This angel, who defies description except to be described as lightning in dazzling white clothing, says to the women, do not be afraid. It isn't a command. No one can order you not to be afraid. The words are calm and soothing. They are words of reassurance: you do not need to be afraid. There is nothing to fear.

The guards, on the other hand, are so incredibly frightened they are like dead men. This reference to being like dead men is not by chance. On a day full of life and hope and joy for the followers of Jesus the Christ, those who do not believe are like the dead. These guards were put there at the tomb by the religious leaders to make sure that the dead Messiah stayed dead. They didn't want the disciples to steal the body and try to pull a fast one saying that Jesus must be alive. The guards were guarding. They believed they were guarding a corpse, the corpse of a human, who would never again see the light of day. There was no room in their hearts and minds for God's power, for angels, for Jesus to turn out to be more than just a human who would never again see the light of day.

The angel says to the women that he knows they are looking for Jesus but informs them that Jesus is not here. The resurrection has already happened. The stone is not rolled away to let Jesus out. The stone is removed to let witnesses in. The women are invited to see for themselves – there is an empty tomb. Jesus is not there. He has been raised from the dead. They are instructed, likely needlessly, to share this amazing good news with all of the other disciples. And they run off, with fear and great joy, to share the news.

“With fear and great joy.” The joy outweighs their fear. Fear is an immobilizer – it stops us from acting and needs something else, something stronger to get us moving. In this case it is great joy. Fear and joy often go hand in hand throughout our lives. When making the decision to commit the rest of your life to one person in marriage...there is fear and joy. When you are about to become a parent for the first time – whether through adoption or birth – there is fear and joy. When faced with leaving familiar faces and surroundings for the unknown of a new job in a new place...there is fear and joy. The joy must outweigh the fear or you, as were the guards, would be paralyzed with fear, living but not truly alive.

As the Church, the body of Christ in the world, we often experience fear. We can experience fear as the church individually. Perhaps we are reluctant to let people know we attend church let alone invite them to join us. Maybe we hesitate to mention God or Jesus or religion in our conversations with friends. There is a fear of what people may say or think of us. Our fear may also be on a deeper personal level – maybe we fear that God does not exist, that God will not answer our prayers, that God is the cause of bad things happening in the world. Doubts and questions are a normal part of belief and our fear often keeps us from expressing

our doubts and asking our questions. Fear of the opinion and reaction of others around us is a great personal paralyzer.

We also experience fear as the Church together. Reaching out to the world around seems like it always takes money and time and energy. We fear that we will not have enough for ourselves if we reach out with what we do have. Reaching out also means inviting people in. We are called to reveal the kingdom through the way in which we live and also to invite people to join us in that life. It is a life of love and equality for all people. It is working to end injustice and oppression, discrimination, hate – fighting to end all of the brokenness that nailed Jesus to the cross. It is a difficult challenge. Fear of not enough for ourselves, fear of the huge challenge, fear of the push back against our challenge to the status quo...these are fears that paralyze the Church.

But, this is my message for you, the angel tells us: Jesus is going on ahead of you. You will see him there. It does not matter what fearful step we are taking into what we think is the unknown, Jesus is going on ahead of us. We will see him there. It is this knowledge that spurs on the women. It is this knowledge that allows their joy to outweigh their fear and they move. They begin the journey back to the other disciples to share the good news of Jesus' resurrection and they run into Jesus himself. Jesus' appearance in the story does not seem to fill the narrative purpose of advancing the story. He does not provide any new information. Jesus' appearance, though, lends credence to the assurance of the angel: Jesus will meet you. And when you encounter Jesus, as is certain you will when hearts and minds are open, the appropriate reaction, as with the women, is to worship him. To worship is to acknowledge the greatness of something or

someone and to react in praise and adoration. Our word “worship” actually comes from the word “worth-ship” – something is worth our praise and adoration and love.

Jesus is worth our praise and adoration and we have reason to be filled with great joy. Jesus showed to us – in his life and on the cross – what true, perfect love is. He is worthy of our deepest admiration and love. And even more than this, because Jesus has been raised to new life, given a body that will never again die, we are shown what is in store for us – for we are given this gift of new life through the mystery of baptism. In baptism, we are clothed with the righteousness – with the true, perfect love – of Christ, made a new creation, given the opportunity to live in God’s kingdom, to eventually be raised to new life in the fully revealed, fully present kingdom of God on earth as in heaven...if we choose...if we choose to turn in fear and great joy to God and live the ways of God’s kingdom.

I thought of the women running from the tomb with fear and great joy and I knew their joy overflowed because their hope had been restored – the hope in God’s promise of a wholly mended world full of wholly mended people had been restored because the Messiah they had seen dead on the cross was now very much alive. This running in hope brought to mind Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, *Animal Dreams*, in which Hallie, a young American woman, moves to Nicaragua during the time of the Sandinista regime. There to teach local people more sustainable farming techniques, she dies after being captured by the Contras, a collection of U.S.-backed right-wing rebel groups, active from the late 70’s to the early 90’s, employing terrorist tactics and committing human rights violations in opposition to the leftist government.

After her death, Hallie's sister Codi, the central character of the novel, begins reading Hallie's letters, correspondence that had remained unopened until now. Codi is startled when reading Hallie's explanation for why she had engaged in such an idealistic and dangerous way of life. Hallie writes, "The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can't say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat. Enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it."

Then Hallie concludes: "Right now, I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides."

God always waits for us to choose our path. We can live in fear of rejection, or not enough, or too great a challenge. Or we can choose the joy of living in the hope – knowing that we live in God's kingdom, moving toward complete wholeness, knowing that when we step forward Jesus is there already to meet us, knowing that what we do and what we say can and does move the world closer to wholeness. With fear and great joy let us live in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides.