

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells them, “Do not be afraid.”

But in this story that we have just heard there are several characters that are afraid. And in this story we have characters that are not afraid. Pay attention to who is afraid and pay attention to who is not afraid. Who is scared? Who is not scared?

We are told that after the Sabbath that as the first day of the week is dawning, some women go to see the tomb. As they arrive at the tomb, they feel the effects of a great earthquake. The ground which they have stood firm on begins to shake. Shaky ground is scary ground.

An angel of the Lord then appears and rolls back the stone. And what does this angel of the Lord then do? This angel of the Lord then sits down on the stone. Anxious and scared beings do not sit down. They frantically run around and look for something to do. Anxious and scared people have got to do something and they have got to do something right then. But the angel of the Lord? He sits.

We are told that the appearance of this angel is like lightning and his clothing white as snow. Once again, images of peace and tranquility surround this messenger of God’s presence. God’s messenger is calm. But the other characters in this story? Not so calm.

We are told that the guards in this story shake with fear and become like dead men. Fear can do that to a person. Fear can cause a person to become frozen and appear to be dead. Fear makes it so that a person cannot think through options. Fear causes a person to become irrational.

But the non-anxious and fearless character in the story speaks. “Do not be afraid,” says the angel of the Lord. “You are looking for Jesus. You are looking in the tomb. But he is not here. If you look to the tomb you are looking in the wrong place. Go and tell others what you have seen. The tomb is empty.”

The women then leave the tomb with great joy but also great fear. That is when Jesus meets them along the road before they have a chance to talk to anyone else. And what does Jesus say to them? Jesus says, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell about what you have seen. But do it without fear!!!” If you try to tell the story of the resurrection of Jesus with fear in your heart, it doesn’t get told very well.

And the next part of the story is not usually read at Easter. Some of the guard then go into the city and tell the religious leaders what had happened. And what is the response of the religious leaders? Great fear. These leaders devise a plan to give a large amount of money to the guards telling them that they need to make up a story. The religious leaders tell the guards to make up a story about how the followers of Jesus came in the middle of the night and stole the body.

The ones who seek after Jesus are told over and over in this story to not be afraid. The ones who do not seek after Jesus are overcome with fear. Fear that leads them to tell misleading stories and fear that leads them to become so scared that they look like dead men.

So where are we in this story? Are we the ones listening to the angel and to Jesus who is telling us over and over, “Do not be afraid! Do not be afraid!!! Do not be afraid!!!!”

Or are we like the guards who are gripped with fear? Are we like the guards who are so gripped in fear that we are like dead people?

We Christians say that we are Easter people. Easter people who believe in the resurrection. That’s what we say all the time. We show up at church once, twice a year, or maybe every Sunday and we say, “We are Easter people!!! We believe in the Resurrection!!!”

We say that we are Easter people but so many of us live as Good Friday people. Good Friday people who are gripped in fear. Good Friday people who believe that the death of Jesus and the triumph of evil is stronger than God.

How can you tell if you are focused on Good Friday or on Easter? Pay attention to what you talk about with your friends. Do you tell stories and encourage stories which are hopeful and which talk about restoration of brokenness? Do you participate in conversations in which the goal is to bring healing to broken relationships and broken places? Or do you tell stories and talk about stories driven by fear and where brokenness in relationships is somehow celebrated?

What do you post of Facebook and Twitter? Do you post comments that seek to hurt others or do you post comments that seek to bring new life and restoration?

Do you talk about how to seek forgiveness in your relationships? Do you talk about how you want to forgive other people? Or do you talk about how you want to get back at people or how you wish for bad things to happen to other people that you don't like for whatever reason?

Do you watch television stations and read books and articles that play on your fears and that get you more and more anxious about what is going on in the world? Or do you watch television programming and read books and articles that seek to celebrate restoration and possibilities and new life?

Do you do your various tasks in life with a sense of despair? I have to go to work, or I have housework to do, or I have to entertain the kids today, or whatever mundane thing you want to claim as mundane. Do you look at your tasks and responsibilities this way? Or do you approach your responsibilities with a sense of hopefulness and possibility?

Are you aware of what happened 20 years ago this week? The people in Rwanda Africa know. For it was 20 years ago that a group of Hutu extremists spent 100 days killing 800,000 Tutsis in that country in one of the worst genocides in the history of the world. But we in the US cared little because we wanted to know about the latest news about OJ Simpson.

Rwanda is a country that is 94% Christian. In fact, I read one story where the priest of a church told his Tutsi congregation of 3000 people to come to the church where they would be safe. This priest then notified the Hutu extremists who came and killed every one of those 3000 Christians either by shooting them or they died after the priest ordered the Hutu extremists to bulldoze the church to make sure that every man, woman, and child was slaughtered.

Some of these Christians were killed by the priest who himself carried a gun and mowed down as many as he could. But this week the people of Rwanda have been pausing to remember. Why? It's not because they are Good Friday people. It's because they are seeking to be Easter people. They are seeking healing and wholeness.

Let me share a story about one of these Easter people in Rwanda. Rev. Gashagaza was one of the first pastors to go into a Rwandan prison that was filled with 15,000 people who had committed murder against his family. In his words, he entered the prison and the prisoners said, 'Oh! How is this Tutsi still alive? Why did he not die? Kill him now!'" One of them said, 'Please, let him finish his preaching. Kill him after.' Rev. Gashagaza said he thought of Jesus on the cross.

"He said, 'I forgive those who betrayed me, those who killed my family.' Rev. Gashagaza gave them this message, and told them, 'Even though you are perpetrators of genocide, God still loves you. God needs your heart. God needs your change.'"

When Rev. Gashagaza was asked what he got out of going into the prisons with people who had committed such violence against his family he said this: "Sleep. Experiencing forgiveness gives peace. Experiencing forgiveness allows me to sleep at night."

Pay attention to what you do this week and what you watch, read, and talk about. Are we people focused on the fear of Good Friday? Or are we people focused on the restoration and reconciliation of Easter Sunday? Good Friday or Easter. Which kind of Christian are you? AMEN.

-Townsend, Tim, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2014/04/13/ministering-to-evil-and-forgiving-the-unforgivable-in-rwanda/>

-Text: Matthew 28

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