

Do Not Be Afraid, Go on to Galilee

Matthew 28:1-10

Rev. Shannon White

Wilton Presbyterian Church Easter 2017

The four Gospels differ in the telling of this most central story of Christianity...the Resurrection.

I love Matthew's account of that first Easter dawn. Many of the followers were in shock and in fear following the death of their beloved Jesus. But the women came to the tomb anyway. Matthew does something different from Luke and Mark here in his account of the purpose of their visit that morning. Rather than bringing oils to anoint the body, as was custom, Matthew says Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mothers of James and Joseph came just to see the body. There is some scholarship which states a three day period was given to make sure the person was actually dead, which wasn't always the case. But Matthew goes even deeper. The word "see" used here means not only to perceive visually but also to understand. There was some risk involved in doing what they did...remember, Jesus had been a political prisoner. There were guards standing at his tomb.

The two Marys were part of a larger group of women introduced in the previous chapter as those who had **provided** for Jesus throughout his ministry. The word used here *diakonei*. It's where we get our word "deacon". These women had cared for Jesus' needs all along the way...like our deacons do: Caring for the sick, providing meals, attending to the physical and spiritual needs of those in need.

And it was they, those caring women, who were chosen to experience the first encounter with the risen Christ and who were charged with making the Resurrection message known...But they had some obstacles: An earthquake, an angel in stark white clothing descending from Heaven, rolling back the stone to reveal an empty tomb. WOW! It was so other worldly that the guards at the tomb shook and became like dead men.

With all of this, Who WOULDN'T be afraid? But the angel tells the women of the Resurrection news that Christ was not there...that he had been raised, just as he had said. The angel tells them to take a look inside and see for themselves and

then to go tell the others to go on to Galilee. And there, the Risen Christ would reunite with them all.

It's hard to imagine what that whole scene might have felt like. Incredible joy mixed with debilitating fear? Shock, maybe, but disbelief? I don't know ...the two women didn't hesitate...they took the Angel's message at face value and ran as they were told. And, it was AS THEY WENT that the risen Christ appeared to them.

Maybe there is an Easter Word in that. Sometimes it is in acting out of the hope of death-defying resurrection, that the Risen Christ suddenly meets us.

Any fear that they had vanished. Excitement and pure joy took over! They worshiped at his feet. Again, the message is reiterated this time by the Risen Christ: "Do not fear. Go on to Galilee, and I will meet you there," he says.

There are those of us for whom the idea of venturing out into the unknown to see life differently and to embrace change and act in faith comes naturally.

One perfect example? John Glenn, who died this past December at the age of 95, but who was just laid to rest 10 days ago. It's worth taking a look at his life. Glenn was a lifelong Presbyterian. He attended Westminster Presbyterian Church in New Concord, Ohio, a town of around 2,400. Both of his parents served as ruling elders (his mother was the first woman ordained as elder in that congregation). Glenn went to a Presbyterian college but didn't get his degree because he was deployed into service first in WWII and then Korea.

We know John Glenn as the first American to orbit the Earth, and as the oldest person to venture into outer space, at age 77. He also represented Ohio for 24 years in the U.S. Senate.

A letter from PC(USA) officials on October 23, 1998—prior to Glenn's Space Shuttle flight—began "To Elder John Glenn, Our Brother in Christ." The officials relayed "prayers and gratitude on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as you continue your public service through research in space."

The letter concluded, "John, your church is grateful for the service you continue to share with millions of Americans and citizens of the world. May the peace of Jesus Christ be with you and your colleagues on this flight. Prayers from those of us in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will certainly be there."

In breaking the barriers into the unknown, John Glenn surely must have had a sense of excitement and anticipation as he ventured out. But he also went in faith. During his Space Shuttle mission he said, “Looking at the Earth from this vantage point, looking at this kind of creation and to not believe in God, to me, is impossible. To see (Earth) laid out like that only strengthens my beliefs,” he said.

An interesting side note: Fellow astronaut and Presbyterian Ruling Elder, Buzz Aldrin, also displayed his faith throughout his NASA career. One of the first things he did upon the first lunar landing mission was to serve himself Communion. He later said of the event, “In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine slowly curled and gracefully came up the side of the cup.”

But what if you are one of those for whom...fear is stronger than the faith which would propel you forward? Or the reality of your situation makes it feel impossible to leave your own tomb and to go ahead as instructed to Galilee to meet the risen Christ there?

Annie Glenn, John Glenn’s wife of almost 74 years helps us to understand that scenario. Annie grew up in College Drive Presbyterian Church— the other Presbyterian Church in New Concord, Ohio. The two met when they were two years old and were later high school sweethearts. They married at Annie’s church on April 6, 1943.

But the two lovebirds were very different. John was athletic and outgoing while Annie barely spoke, not because she didn’t have anything to say, but because when she did, people often assumed she was either deaf or mentally disabled.

For most of her life, Annie was afflicted with an 85 percent stutter, meaning she would become “hung up on 85 percent of the words she tried to speak...”a real handicap,” as John put it. It was debilitating, to say the least. It caused her to avoid the limelight. That, of course, became more of an issue as her husband spent more and more time in the spotlight.

Everyday tasks were frustrating, anxiety-producing and excruciating for her. She couldn’t ask a clerk in the store for what she wanted, or communicate with a cab driver without having to write on paper. And talking to the 911 operator when her daughter needed an ambulance required her neighbor’s help. You get the picture.

Then, one day in 1973, when she was 53 years old, she and John were watching the “Today” show. A doctor was discussing a ground-breaking method of treatment for stutterers. It required an intensive inpatient three-week program.

Annie enrolled. Participants weren’t allowed to call friends or family for that three weeks. But when it was over, Annie picked up the telephone.

“When I called John, he cried. People just couldn’t believe that I could really talk, ‘she said.”

And when she got home, she said, “John, I’ve wanted to tell you this for years. Pick up your socks!”

Her courage to go into the unknown then led her into a career of advocacy for the disabled. She gave speeches when her husband ran for the senate, she became an adjunct college professor and gave countless people hope to move forward in their own lives.

John later said of his beloved Annie, “It takes guts to operate with a disability. I don’t know if I would have had the courage to do all the things that Annie did so well.”

Annie Glenn is now 98 years old. She and her children buried their beloved John 10 days ago on what would have been their 74<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

Thank God Annie Glenn continued on past her empty tomb and faithfully walked through any fear she may have had. The risen Christ met her and led her into an exquisite ministry.

Perhaps no one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the darkness where hope cannot be seen. Easter is the last thing we are expecting. And that’s why it terrifies us. This day is not about bunnies, springtime and Easter eggs. ***It’s about more hope than we can handle.***

The Easter event gives us our greatest hope in the face of our greatest fear. Where do YOU need hope in your life right now? Do not fear...for the Risen Christ is with you, and goes before you to prepare the way.

Hallelujah! Amen!