

What Would We Live For?
Matthew 28:1-10

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Seattle, WA April 16, 2017

You're on the high-dive at the public pool. Maybe somebody dared you to get up there. Maybe you dared yourself. It seemed less daunting from down on the ground. But now you're up here, and you're having second thoughts. You don't even trust yourself to walk out to the end of the board. It bounces! It's not at all stable—you might fall in the water! Which, of course, is what you're supposed to do, but it suddenly seems like a very bad idea. Who thought that building this thing was such a great plan? How did adults actually approve it? You intend to talk to the lifeguard... just as soon as you're back on terra firma.

Meanwhile, there you are paralyzed by fear, not able to go forward, not able to go back because a big kid is standing on the top rung of the ladder behind you. And he's getting impatient. The only way out is forward.

I imagine this is the feeling the disciples are experiencing after Jesus' crucifixion. Can't go back, terrified to go forward. Stuck. Paralyzed by fear.

So I notice how much of a role fear plays in this scripture passage from Matthew. There are guards, specifically stationed at Jesus' tomb to ensure that his disciples don't try to steal his body and then claim he was raised from the dead. But the guards are so terrified at the sight of the angel that they pass out. Fear conquers them completely, and they are useless in their role as guards. When the angel encounters the two Marys, the first words out of his mouth are, "Do not be afraid." And when, a few minutes later, the women encounter Jesus himself, he says the same thing: "Do not be afraid."

You notice that the women do not pass out. Just saying. The male disciples aren't there at the tomb at all—presumably too afraid to venture out. But perhaps because the two Marys are bold, or perhaps because, as women, they are less of a threat and therefore more invisible, they dare to come out to see Jesus' body. And *that* act of daring leads to the next and the next: they encounter the angel and receive his message without passing out. "Jesus is raised," he says, "Come and see where he lay." They encounter Jesus, which should rightfully terrify anyone who is reasonably expecting him to be dead. He says, "Greetings!" like "Howdy! Hey there!" And the women dare to deliver his message back to the other disciples.

This courage is all in stark contrast to the version of this story that appears in the gospel of Mark. In the original ending to that gospel, the women encounter a young man dressed in white, who tells them that Jesus has been raised and will meet them in Galilee. Same message. But in that version, the women flee from the tomb in terror and say nothing to anyone.

The end.

Where does that leave us? Stuck in that moment of blind terror. So unsatisfactory! So unhelpful for disciples through the ages trying to follow Jesus with faith and courage!

Which I think is why Matthew's version of this story points to all the fear and repeatedly tells the women—and, by extension, us—not to be afraid. The women run from the tomb "with fear and great joy" to tell the disciples the good news. "Fear and great joy." Despite what should be paralyzing fear, they keep moving forward. And in that movement, in bearing that good news, they find great joy. They find a way through their fear, their pain, their grief.

This is important. Both the angel and Jesus say that Jesus will meet the disciples in Galilee. This part of the message almost sounds like something we might say on a cell phone. So many cell phone calls are about the logistics of location. “Yep, got your message, and I’ll meet you at the movie theater.” Jesus’ message is, “Tell the disciples I’ll meet them in Galilee.” You could write that on a post-it and stick it on the fridge.

Why is this little message so important? Two reasons, and they are related. First, of course, is the enormous and weird news that Jesus isn’t actually dead. The work is not done; there’s more to this story. Second, this message invites the disciples to move forward out of their paralysis. There is no going back. There is not even much time to stand still. There is only going forward. Because **if they don’t go forward and spread the good news, then Jesus truly is dead.** So they have to face their fear, get unstuck from their paralysis, and begin to move on into the next phase of this story, this ministry, this good news.

How do we get stuck? Life throws us plenty of curve balls. Maybe it’s the death of someone we love, and a grief that swallows whole weeks at a time. Maybe we are overwhelmed and paralyzed by a changing world and all the top issues of our day: climate change, immigration, refugees, wars, famine, terrorism, politics—you name it. That can all be overwhelming to the point of paralysis. Maybe it’s health issues: an illness, depression, diminished abilities through aging.

There are plenty of ways to get stuck. Jesus and the angel urge us to get unstuck. Move forward. Meet Jesus in Galilee.

This is a story of resurrection. Many of you know that I don’t ask of the scripture whether this story really happened in this way, because that’s not a question we can answer. I encourage us instead to consider how is this story relevant to us right here and now? What is waiting to be resurrected in us? What needs to die in order to make space for what will really bring us alive as followers of the risen Christ? How do we dare to

go out to the tomb, the place of death, to stare it in the face and find instead new life? How do we learn to be unafraid, to move forward through our fear with great joy?

Eleven years ago today, on April 16, 2006, which was also Easter, a small group of people set out from a sunrise Easter service in Phoenix, Arizona to walk across the country with a message about progressive Christianity. I was pretty sure I wasn't in good enough shape, hadn't trained enough. And a number of things had to die in my life in order to make room for this walk and whatever new life it brought: I had quit my job, rented out my house, found a place for my cats to stay. I felt as if I was flinging myself off a cliff: no idea what this walk would bring, what I would do afterward, how we would meet all our expenses, because we hadn't raised enough money. But the vision was to walk to Washington, D.C., sharing the good news through a document called the "Phoenix Affirmations": twelve statements about love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self.

I had considered taking a leave of absence from my job in order to do this walk. But I knew that if I quit my job, I would be looking and listening for God at a whole different level, and that seemed really important. So I quit my job, flung myself into the unknown... and discovered my new life. I became open to listening for God in a whole new way. And God started talking.

About halfway across, in St. Louis, Missouri, someone asked me, "Have you considered seminary?" Seminary?! No. And then someone else asked: "Have you thought about going to seminary?" And then someone else, and someone else. It got downright weird. At one point I counted how many people had said this to me—people who didn't know each other, didn't know that anyone else had said it. I lost track after about 12. Okay, God, I'm listening.

I had to let part of my life die in order to be open to that message. And even when I finally said yes to it, I had no idea where it was leading,

except that I knew I wasn't going to be a minister in a church. I just said yes and moved forward.

The point is that we all have such moments, such opportunities. There have been times when I have been afraid, or unwilling to let go of something. This particular time I managed to say yes and move forward, to meet Jesus on the road ahead.

In the UCC we say, "God is still speaking." God is still calling you. What is the calling? How do we respond? What makes your heart sing, your eyes light up, your soul come alive—even as it terrifies you? To what would you gladly give your time, energy, life's blood? What would you live for?

We can't all be Jesus. We *can* all be the best version of ourselves. What does that look like for you? Most loving, creative, serving, generous, joyful, spiritually centered, ...? That sounds like something I would live for.

You're on the high-dive at the public pool. You do know how to swim. You know how to dive from lower platforms. You could do a belly-flop, and it would hurt, but then you would at least be off this high-dive. You take a deep breath, and then another. You run forward at full tilt. Your toes leave the end of the diving board. In the midst of your terror, even as you fling yourself into the air, your heart races with unexpected joy.

Amen.