

“Hey Fear! Make Room for Joy!”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Matthew 28:1-10
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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Sometimes I wish angels would change up the script. Every time they show up, it’s the same old lines: “Fear not. Do not be afraid.”

I wonder if the angels know how much they are asking of us. “Do not be afraid” is no easy task. In my experience, fear is extraordinarily sticky, and it takes years of practice to get unstuck. I would appreciate it if the angels could deliver a more attainable request.

Imagine visiting the grave of a loved one in the wee hours of the morning, before it is fully light. You’ve brought flowers and plan to pay your respects before the cemetery is crowded with other visitors. When you arrive in the semi-darkness, you find that someone has dug up the grave, and the body is gone. You can’t tell me you wouldn’t be spooked.

Amidst the bright colors and blooming flowers of Easter Sunday, we may have forgotten that the biblical scene was first spooky before it was joyful. These women arrived in the near dark to find a tampered-with tomb when just days before, they had endured the horrifying trauma of watching their dear Jesus brutally beaten and violently killed. You may remember that some of the other disciples huddled together and locked themselves in a room for fear of the mob, and who could blame them? It’s little wonder that the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid.” These were fear-filled days.

Furthermore do not forget how the Bible describes angels. Biblical angels were often intimidating creatures with six wings and formidable presence—nothing Precious Moments or inviting about them. Matthew says the angel who came to Jesus’ tomb brought an earthquake with him, and his appearance was like lightning. The last time the earth shook was when Jesus breathed his last breath. The guards—Matthew doesn’t say how many—were so frightened by this one angel that they shook right along with the earth and “became like dead men,” which is a little ironic, given that this is a resurrection story. The guards—whose job it was to defend and protect—fainted at the mere sight of this angel.

It is doubtful that they fainted because they were mere inexperienced wimps—guards-in-training, so to speak. It is more likely that the event truly was scary enough to make armed men go limp with terror. Interestingly, the other three gospels tell gentler versions of the resurrection: by the time the women arrive at the tomb, the stone is already rolled away, there is no mention of guards, and the angels look more like men than lightning. But the Gospel of Matthew gives us the impression that the women were there to witness the whole thing. The way Matthew tells it, it was as if the guards fainted before the women’s eyes, and as the armed men fell to the ground, the angel turned and said to the women, “Do not be afraid.”

Yeah right, Mr. Cemetery Angel whose arrival caused an earthquake and whose lightning toppled guards.

"Do not be afraid," he said, "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

The next thing Matthew tells us is that the women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and they ran to tell the disciples. They left the tomb with fear and great joy. Fear and joy together . . . imagine that.

They were still afraid, but they followed the rest of the angel's instructions anyway. They were still afraid, but they also found themselves feeling great joy. I wonder, maybe if we're waiting around for all our fear to be gone, we will never experience joy. Maybe we have to learn how to tolerate fear and joy side-by-side.

The Bible says perfect love casts out fear, and I assume that is true, only my love has yet to be perfect, so what I find instead is that love and joy refuse to let fear take up all my space. "Scoot over!" they say. "We're coming in!" And fear has no choice but to quit hogging all the seats.

I love the way Elizabeth Gilbert talks about fear. She says she doesn't try to kill off her fear or go to war against it. Instead, she makes space for it. "In fact," she writes, "I cordially invite fear to come along with me everywhere I go. I even have a welcoming speech prepared for fear, which I deliver right before embarking upon any new project or big adventure."ⁱ In her speech, here she says the word *creativity*, we could insert *joy*, or *hope*, or *love*. Her welcoming speech goes like this:

*"Dearest Fear: Creativity and I are about to go on a road trip together. I understand you'll be joining us, because you always do . . . There's plenty of room in this vehicle for all of us, so make yourself at home, but understand this: Creativity and I are the only ones who will be making any decisions along the way. I recognize and respect that you are a part of this family, and so I will never exclude you from our activities, but still—your suggestions will never be followed. You're allowed to have a seat, and you're allowed to have a voice, but you are not allowed to have a vote. You're not allowed to touch the road maps; you're not allowed to suggest detours; you're not allowed to fiddle with the temperature. Dude, you're not even allowed to touch the radio. But above all else, my dear old familiar friend, you are absolutely forbidden to drive."*ⁱⁱ

Matthew reports that the women left the tomb with fear and GREAT joy, which tells me not that they were unafraid but that their joy was GREATER THAN their fear, and that is what true courage is all about—finding what inside you is willing to take up more space your fear.

Maybe the phrase, "Do not be afraid," is angel-speak for "Expand. There's more to see here than just the parts that frighten you. Open wide. Make room in that pounding heart of yours, for I'm bringing you good news."

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! If you are really paying attention, you will notice this is not only joyful news—it is scary. It means you might be asked to follow him to death and back. It means you are called to Life, and Life includes risk, heartache, and loss. There is, after all, a seductive escapism to death and death-like choices that frees you from the burden to live. You can't be both fully alive and numbed out to pain. To embrace life fully, you have to be open to things you do not want—feelings you'd rather not feel, sights you'd rather not see, suffering you'd rather not experience or encounter.

What Jesus' resurrection means for us is not that suffering will be no more, but that suffering does not get the final word. To walk in the light and life of Christ doesn't mean our fears are now gone, but when we keep company with Christ, our fears begin to shrink in comparison and this is how it should be. Fear should never be left to its own devices. You need joy and faith and hope and love to tag along.

Why do you think the guards fainted but the women did not? Well, what did those guards have other than their fear and more or less a sense of duty? The women had so much more. They had their love for Jesus and their own fidelity to his way. They had their faith; though shattered, they still carried faith remnants, carried them in the form of balms and spices with which they would anoint the body of the Lord. If they had to let go, at least they'd give a proper burial. They had their rituals and their practices; they had their voluntary act of showing up, unlike the guards who were required to be there.

I'm not sure if these grieving women had any joy or any hope left that morning, but surely the appearance of that angel—though utterly terrifying—was like lightning that lit up their darkness. In that unexpected flash of light invading their grief, I imagine the women at least became curious if hope was possible. Sometimes that is the most we can muster in times of loss and despair—a mere curiosity about whether hope and joy will one day be possible. Even a small dose of curiosity can keep a person from fainting, from falling down like dead in the time of trial.

The women did, in fact, fall down, but not in the same way as the guards. The women were headed back to deliver the angel's message to the disciples, when suddenly they encountered Jesus himself. They went over to him, and, as Matthew reports, they “took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.” To take hold of someone's feet, you have to get down on the ground.

Why his feet? Was it a sign of homage? Or a way of touching his skin to know that he was real and that he was alive? Was it an effort to keep him there, stake him to the ground, make him stay? He must not leave them again. To touch his feet—was it a sign of reverence or intimacy? Was it an expression of joy and amazement in seeing him or an expression of fear that he might leave again? Was it both? Does it matter?

Do you know what Jesus said to them? He said, “Do not be afraid,” and when he said it, he sounded like an angel. The women's fear may have been great, but Jesus knew their joy could be greater still. He didn't want them to stay on the ground, stuck in their fear, not wanting to move or to let go or to release him to his future. Instead he wanted them to rise up and live.

“I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” That is

how he put it once. He had said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (John 10:10b-11; 18).

Even when we are afraid, we have the power of the risen Christ, and the power of the dying Christ. In life and in death, he is with us. He is in us. He is all around us. We do not have to keep clinging to his ankles. We can stand up beside him and walk free.

O Beloved of God, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. You may have doubts or fears or burdens all crowding your space. That’s pretty normal if you do. But maybe on this Easter Sunday, you can create a little extra space for joy, for courage, for God, for hope, for love. Maybe you can make a little bit of space for amazement, for forgiveness, for change, for new life.

May the power of the risen Christ expand your capacity for joy and gladness. May the power of the risen Christ put your fears in perspective, put your fears in their proper place. May the power of the risen Christ inspire you to take up your life again and live. Just know that you might have to live with fear—we call that bravery, and it suits you. Accept it, and do not be afraid. The power of fear is less than the power of Christ. For Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Alleluia. Amen.

ⁱ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear* (Riverhead Books, NY: 2015), 25.

ⁱⁱ Gilbert, 25-26.