

Do Not Be Afraid, Matthew 28:1-10

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Introduction

Last week at the annual Family Easter Eggstravaganza I decided to make a very special egg. Because the theme of our children's program is G-3 for "Gather, Grow, Go," I decided to paint a big G on the side of an egg dyed with two colors that start with G, green and gold. I presented my egg to Pastor Greg, using my voice that can fill a room, and explained my use of the colors green and gold with a big green G painted on the side for G-3. Emily James called out, "No! The colors should be blue and orange!" A chorus of other young voices joined the protest. I had almost incited a riot. So I asked if my green and gold egg with a G on the side was being rejected by the G-3 kids. The fifth-grader Abby Dunn called out: "It's not a gift. It's an insult." Abby was absolutely right. G-3 was just a thin excuse for me to rub the Green Bay Packers in the face of a room full of Chicago Bears fans. But most G-3 kids know that Pastor Jonathan sometimes says and does things that are silly, so they dished it back. A good time was had by all.

A true gift is not an insult, it is an honor; it is not a lie, it is an act of love. Jesus Christ, alive and reigning in heaven, wants to make a gift of himself to you. Jesus offers you the covering of his own blood as your pardon for your sins so that you can live forever. You need only to claim his blood for yourself. But many people treat this gift as though it is an insult, because it must be an insult to be called a sinner.

If being called a sinner is an insult, it is only to our pride, and pride is a problem of sin. I am close to a situation where an elderly man had to be told he was no longer going to drive. His pride was insulted, but it is a life-saving, life-giving insult that really is not an insult at all, it is

simply the truth. So hear this, the truth: God loves you and wants to honor you with the gift of the Spirit of Christ and the glory of eternal life, so that your sins may be absolved and you may share in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. **Let us Pray:**

Father in heaven, Give us the grace to receive Christ in this hour, and the peace that comes from knowing that our sins are forgiven and our spirits are healed. In Jesus' name, amen.

1. Suspicious of the Gift: The Soldiers

Matthew's gospel includes the detail that soldiers were guarding the tomb. At the descent of an angel "they were so afraid that they shook and became like dead men." Perhaps the first flash of the angel's appearance, combined with the thunder of the earth's tremors, caused these rugged male soldiers to faint in terror; the women, though afraid, remained conscious and alert. In the process of obeying the command from heaven, the women find Jesus himself and, rather than fainting here either, they fall down *to worship him*.

Throughout the gospels it often happens that people recognize God's presence when they are doing the things they should be doing, while those who are blind to God's presence are persisting in unbelief and sin. To the stubborn and prideful God never seems to show up, yet God is often present. In doing their duty the soldiers had an encounter with God, but none of them had the faith to know it. They were serving on behalf of Rome, of godlessness and idolatry; they were part of the oppression of a people and of crushing that people's hope. Heaven showed itself to them anyway. By the grace of God these Roman soldiers became witnesses to a miracle.

Not one of them responded in faith. The point of view they took is detailed in verses 11 through 15. If we modify and modernize a little bit, one can see why their version is almost plausible: There was an earthquake, and a burst of lightning; the force of the shock drove them unconscious to the ground. When they came to, the stone had rolled off its seal and the body was

gone. Followers of Jesus scouting the place must have seized that moment just after the earthquake but before the guards awoke, to steal the body. What a coincidence that the earthquake took place right underneath the stone that sealed the tomb, shaking it loose. If life weren't so random, a person might almost think God had a hand in these things somehow.

The miracles did not awaken faith. The soldiers had been taught that it was an insult to the pride of Rome for anyone to think that a King among the Jews could raise himself higher than Caesar. That prejudice blinded them to the very light of God displayed to them in power and glory, it made these skeptics insensible to the exact tangible proofs that skeptics demand.

In the 1980's Steve Martin made a movie called *The Man With Two Brains*. In this comedic farce he played a brain surgeon who was a widower. He fell in love with a patient of his played by Kathleen Turner, a person whom the viewers already know is a scheming villain. As the doctor is falling for her he looks to a painting of his dead first wife and asks, "If she is not right for me, send me some kind of sign." At once the lights blink on and off, the picture spins, the wall cracks, you hear a woman's wailing cry and a wind blows through the house with cyclone force. When it is all over Steve Martin is still gazing at the picture saying, "Just show me a sign. Any sign will do." Because his mind had already been made up, *No sign would do*.

To the faithless no sign ever does. The heart must be open to God to receive God. And that takes humility; pride in oneself must be surrendered.

2. Sharing the Gift: The Women

The women were doing their duties of faith to honor the righteous dead. Having been with Jesus and seen the healings and the exorcisms, they were veterans of the holy. The angel inspired fear but not to the point of fainting. For them, the encounter with heaven did not bring darkness and sleep, but new light, new awareness, new insight, new truth.

It also put them on a mission that no Roman soldier was equipped to perform. Jesus comes to them and says, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they will see me.” His resurrection is both an event to be reported and a gift to be promised: He has risen. His disciples will see him. Their message has the same outline as every good news sermon ever since: Point one, *Jesus is alive*; Point two, *this is how to meet him*. Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of James were the first apostolic team of preachers of the gospel.

When Jesus speaks this second “Do not be afraid” I do not think he is referring any longer to the signs and wonders. He means “do not be afraid” of the mission the angel gave them. These women must go and tell the men that Jesus is risen from the dead, with the promise that he will become present among them. That can be intimidating, as any woman today can tell you who has had the experience of having to share information with a skeptical man.

On a trip back from Indiana we had the GOOGLE maps giving us voice directions, and that app or whatever uses a pleasant female voice. She kept telling me to get onto I-65 south, but her words seemed to me as nonsense. I knew better until it became clear that those orange detour construction had been trying to get me onto I-65, because the way I wanted to go was closed. Thinking I knew better, I missed all those opportunities and ended up on the Dan Ryan driving through downtown Chicago on a late-afternoon. This added some time to our return home.

In those days, when the testimony of a woman did not have the same legal status as the word of a man, men might have been insulted by the claim from two female witnesses to a new Word from God unlike anything heard before. Centuries roll along, and too many men still hold it to be an insult that women can be apostolic witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and stewards of the gospel. In the Evangelical Covenant we have been ordaining women pastors for over forty years, but even now woman pastors face barriers to being heard that I have never lived

with or experienced. “Do not be afraid, but go and tell my brothers.”

These two women were the first to take the risks for the gospel, in other words, to carry the crosses of post-resurrection discipleship. In the way Matthew tells the story, the women overcome their fear and there is no hesitation on the part of the men in receiving their word. Skeptical or not, all eleven apostles are in Galilee by verse 16; the clear impression is that they went in obedience to the command of Christ which they had heard mediated to them through the women. The community that the men and women shared had created space in the heart of the men to be able to hear the women tell them such surprising news.

For many of you, some of the closest people to you believe with all their heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. In your life these might be women for the most part, who keep bringing Jesus up when they are around you. Perhaps it is your wife, a mother or mother-in-law, a sister or another inlaw; in many cases the woman of faith who carries the gospel in her heart is a grandmother to you. What is the credibility of these gospel-sharers in your life? Can you truly scoff at them for the nonsense they believe while at the same time honor them for the lives they have lived being inspired by those same beliefs? When these veterans of the holy talk about sin, do you hear an insult that you push away, or do you hear a heart broken for you in love? This is the heart of God. You are hearing it from me right now. Day to day, the heart of God beats in these persons in your community, perhaps in members of your family or perhaps it the heart of God in your grandmother, when they share God’s love with you.

Conclusion

The gift of Jesus often offends worldly people. To those who set their hope in human virtues and duties, such as the Roman soldiers, it is an insult that Jesus of Nazareth lays claim to a loyalty that reaches above that commanded by worldly powers. To those who hope in their

own virtuous living, it is an insult to be called a sinner who can never earn or merit God's approval. To those who presume that God shares our prejudices, so that God is partial to men over women, or partial to one nation over others, or blesses one race over others, it is an insult that God's love is impartial; that women are the first to whom Jesus appears, that his followers are commanded to take the gospel of God's love to all nations without prejudice or distinction.

But those insults are only insults because we are proud and vain and filled with envy. The very sin we deny exists within us is the filter that taints and twists the gospel of God's love when we hear it. Then, instead of responding with joy, we become defensive. The light breaks upon us, the voice of God thunders, but instead of opening our hearts to receive him and the gift of life in Christ, we squeeze our eyes shut and fall faint, retreating into our own darkness.

Yet God, who seems so absent and unreal to you, is as near to you as your lips and heart. The gospel has not changed since Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of James first shared it: Jesus is risen from the dead, and his heart is set on meeting you. Every time someone shares the gospel with you, that is a divine appointment God has scheduled in order to meet you. Do not faint backward into your darkness. Come to the light.

Repent of your sins and Christ will meet you, today. Christ will make a gift of his own Spirit to you to make you right and reconciled to God. No longer will you be called a sinner, but a forgiven sinner. Your new life begins when you surrender your pride to God and open your heart to Jesus Christ. Jesus is alive, and he is ready to meet you! Amen.