

CHRIST ENCOUNTERS: THE EMPTY TOMB

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Matthew 28:1-10

The part of our holy Scripture that the world at large is most familiar with is undoubtedly the Ten Commandments as found in the book of Exodus. You don't have to be Jewish or Christian to have at least a passing acquaintance with this text. There are many ways to look at the Commandments, but at the very least, they are God's expectations on how we are to conduct our lives. *Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. Do not take the Lord's name in vain. Honor the Sabbath.* And so on.

In the New Testament, Jesus adds to this list with what could be considered an eleventh and twelfth commandment. We read that a lawyer approaches Jesus and says to him, *Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?* He expects Jesus to name one of the ten. But Jesus tells him that the greatest commandment is this: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind.* But there is more. He goes on telling the lawyer, *A second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.* (Matthew 22:37) So, here we have two additional commandments—love God and love your neighbor.

Now, I'm not going to argue if these are actually new commandments or simply codicils to the original. It doesn't matter because I want to keep going and look at what also might be considered thirteenth commandment given to us by Jesus. We find it in the story of his resurrection.

Last Sunday, Palm Sunday, we looked at the account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. As he rode into that city, the people recognized the image of a king on a donkey (and a colt) and, in response, they laid branches on the ground before him shouting, *Hosanna to the Son of David.*

A lot takes place in the days following Palm Sunday—a period of time we know as Holy Week. Jesus spends time at the temple teaching the people. Judas enters into an agreement to betray Jesus to the authorities. Jesus observes the Passover feast with his disciples. Then, following that meal, he prays in the garden where he is arrested and is dragged to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest. While he is interrogated there, Peter famously denies knowing him. The next morning, Jesus is brought before the Roman governor, Pilate, who questions Jesus and then offers the crowd a choice—does he free Barabbas or Jesus. The crowd, of course, calls for Barabbas. Pilate determines that Jesus is to be crucified and hands him to the soldiers who mock him and beat him and place on his head a crown crafted out of thorns. They take him to Golgotha and place him on a cross amongst the common criminals. Jesus hung on the cross for hours before he died. At that moment, we

read that the curtain in the temple which concealed the Holy of Holies, split in two. There was also an earthquake. The Roman centurion on guard at the cross saw all of this and declared, *Truly this man was God's son.*

Before the start of the Sabbath at sunset, one of Jesus followers, a wealthy man from Arimathea named Joseph, goes to Pilate and asks for permission to bury Jesus's body. Pilate agrees and Joseph places the body in his own personal tomb. He seals the tomb with a stone. The next day, the chief priests go to Pilate to request that guards be placed at the tomb. Because Jesus had told his disciples that he would rise from the dead, they concerned that his disciples might steal the body and make Jesus even more popular than already was. Pilate tells them to send their own guards. And so they do.

By our modern accounting, Jesus was crucified and entombed on a Friday. The Jewish Sabbath began at sundown that day and ended at sundown on Saturday. The first opportunity to visit the tomb in daylight would be on Sunday morning. So, at dawn that day, two women, both associated with Jesus—Mary Magdalene and Mary who was most likely Jesus' mother, ventured out to the tomb.

Although Matthew doesn't tell us why they went, it is most likely that they went to check on the corpse. In that day, it was the traditional job of women to prepare bodies for burial. The women would wash, anoint, and dress the dead. Jesus' burial had been rushed because of the impending Sabbath, so I imagine they wanted to make sure all was okay.

So Mary and Mary go to the tomb. There is an earthquake. The reason for this seismic event is that an angel appears from heaven. This angel takes a moment to roll the stone from the entrance of the tomb. He then sits on top of the stone. The angel had the traditional appearance of a heavenly being. He looked like lightning and his presence was so terrifying to the guards that they became paralyzed with fear.

The angel spoke to the two Marys saying, *Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.* And then they invite the women to see the place in the tomb where they had placed Jesus' corpse two days earlier.

The angel continues to instruct the women that they are to go and inform the disciples that Jesus is raised and that they must go at once to Galilee where they will find him. The women depart *with fear and great joy* and rush to deliver their message to the others.

But as they are going, Jesus intercepts them and says to them, *Greetings.* The women recognize him and they drop down and take hold of his feet to worship him.

Jesus says to them, *Do not be afraid*, and repeats the message of the angel that they must tell the others to go to Galilee.

So, did you hear the thirteenth commandment there? Did you hear the words that Jesus spoke to the women? What is it that Jesus said? He said, *Do not be afraid*. And this, I will argue, is our thirteenth commandment. And probably the most difficult one to follow.

Fear rules our lives. Fear is everywhere. Fear restricts us. It hems us in. It traps us. The guards at the tomb are so overcome with fear that they became like dead men. That is what fear does to us. Fear is life draining. Fear pulls us down.

There are lots of things that we call fear but which are actually just phobias. The American Psychological Association makes a distinction between fears and phobias. Fear, they say, is a rational reaction to a potentially dangerous event or object. Fear, for example, will prompt you to take cover during a storm or flee from a dangerous animal.

Phobias, on the other hand, are irrational fears triggered by either specific or general events or items. With phobias, the anxiety far outweighs the threat it poses.

There are many phobias. For example, some people have a fear of spiders. That is called arachnophobia. A fear of closed spaces is claustrophobia. A fear of blood is hemophobia. A fear of heights is acrophobia. And if you are afraid of giants then you suffer from *fee-fi-fo-bia*.

But when Jesus says, *do not be afraid*, he is talking about more than just spiders or shadows. He is talking about the rational anxieties that limit us as God's children—anxieties like the fear of failure, the fear of the death of a loved one, the fear of serious illness, the fear of climate change, the fear of mass shootings, the fear of terrorism, the fear of criminal activity. If we allow it, fear can stop us dead in our tracks.

But we gather here on Easter Sunday to give thanks to God that we are now free from living lives paralyzed in fear.

The words that the angel spoke to the women on Easter morning are meant for us as well. *Do not be afraid*, he said. *I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.*" The very worst thing that could possibly happen—the death of God's Son on a cross—has now been overcome by the resurrection. Darkness has been replaced by light, and death has been replaced by new life.

The promise of the angel is that Jesus is going ahead of us, always ahead of us. We do not need to fear the future, because Jesus is in it. He is calling us forward and promising to meet us in what lies ahead.

Most of our fears are grounded in uncertainty about the future. We don't want to get on an airplane because we are afraid it will crash. We are nervous about retirement because we fear that we have not saved enough money.

When we are stressed by uncertainty, we cannot keep Jesus' commandment to not be afraid. But when we realize that the risen Jesus is with us, we can lay our fears aside.

On Easter morning, the two women *hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy*. Yes, they still felt some fear, but it was beginning to be mixed with a joyful understanding of the possibilities of the future. And when they met Jesus, what did he say? *Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me*. Jesus is with us where we are going.

Easter gives us the power to live without fear, trusting Jesus to lead us into the future with confidence. Although we will still face situations that make us anxious and afraid, we do not need to be overwhelmed. We can give our fears to the Lord, who conquered death and is waiting for us in the future.

We can keep the commandment *Do not be afraid* because we have a risen Lord who has overcome anything that can hurt or destroy us. Because Jesus has been raised, we do not have to be afraid.

Alleluia. Amen.