

Psalm 118: 1, 4-7, 14, 24, 29 (New Revised Standard Version)

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let those who fear the Lord say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place. With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me? The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Matthew 28:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "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. 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." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

As we heard the passage read from Matthew, did you notice how many times fear is mentioned in the Easter story?

At the tomb, the guards were shaken and frightened, *like dead men*.
The religious leaders were **so afraid** of Jesus and his teaching
that they were willing to lie and even murder to be rid of him.

Pilate, the Roman governor, was so **frightened** by the crowd,
that despite having proclaimed Jesus entirely innocent,
yet he still condemned Jesus to be flogged and crucified.
On the night of his arrest, in **fear**, the disciples all ran away,
and 3 times Peter **fearfully** denied that he even knew Jesus.

And when the women got to the tomb on Easter morning,
the angel's message began by urging them, **do not be afraid**.

After seeing the empty tomb, they left **with fear** and great joy,
and when they met Jesus along the way, he said, **do not be afraid**.

Clearly, fear was an important factor driving the Easter story.
The truth is, unrestrained fear can be one of the most powerful,
one of the very destructive forces and driving influences that
can cause us to miss seeing the blessings of good & wonderful.

This world around us can be a very difficult and frightening place.

Life's harsh events and circumstances can immobilize us **with fear**.

Just 3 years ago our worship on Easter had to be virtual only,
because of the unprecedented danger **and fear** of Covid-19.

Even today, many are still fearful, stressed, struggling & anxious.
Violence, corruption and uncertainty still disrupts our world
& just reading or watching the news can be a chilling experience.

And even worse than the actual issues of concern & the dangers we face

is the pervasive way that those fears can overwhelm and dominate us,

define & restrict how we see, understand and live in this world,

which can also drain away our joy and peace and happiness...

... and surely a fear-driven life is not how God would have us live.

The women who came to the tomb on that first Easter morning,
had seen the gruesome horror of Jesus brutalized and killed,
and hadn't come expecting or even hoping for any good news.

But the point of the resurrection is that God wasn't done yet.

The tomb was empty because Jesus had been raised from the dead,
as the women at the tomb were given the good & hopeful news, vs. 5-6

The angel said to the women, "**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.

Then along the way as they were leaving, vs. 10,

Jesus said to them, "**Do not be afraid**; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Both the angel and Jesus said to the women, Do not be afraid.

The message, the joy and promise of Easter is that God's gracious love
and healing purpose have conquered human sin, hatred, envy & evil,
so don't be afraid, for there really is nothing to fear.

The admonitions, do not be afraid or fear not
are found in Scripture more than 70 times,
so maybe that's something God want us **to notice,**
something important for us to believe and to trust.

If we do believe and if we do trust the promises of God,

then we can boldly declare along with the psalmist, Psalm 118:6,

With the Lord on my side **I do not fear**. What can mortals do to me?

Fear replaced by hope is the crucial & core truth of the Easter story,

that helps us understand the meaning and significance

of the life and mission, the death and resurrection of Jesus,

and that fear and evil were crushed by hope and new life in Christ.

So in what way is Easter God's answer and solution to our fear?

When I visited an old Civil War cemetery just outside Petersburg, VA,

I noticed two things that to me expressed well and pointed
toward the meaning & effect of the resurrection on Easter.

1st, there is a huge stone archway at the entrance into the cemetery

with these words carved across the top: **Awaiting The Reveille.**

Though we may die, and someday we surely will,

Jesus has promised, that **we shall awaken to eternal life.**

Just as Jesus lives, so too shall we live eternally... that's Good News!

And because Jesus has been raised,

**God has vindicated Jesus and all the things he said and did
demonstrating that his promises and teachings are true.**

2nd, as I walked through that cemetery in Petersburg, I noticed

a single tiny purple flower that had somehow managed
to push its way through a little crack in an old tombstone.

We certainly know that a tombstone is hard and impenetrable,

and that it's far more powerful than a petty little flower -
growing gloriously & boldly,

-- yet there it was,

and proclaiming the power of life over death...

... just as the living, gracious and loving presence of Jesus
proclaims his victory over human sin, depravity and death.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a clear demonstration
that God's love is even stronger than death and the grave,
meaning that when we die, by grace there **is something more**,
which gives us renewed hope even over our worst worry & fear.

Easter resurrection means that God's love, promises & presence
changes and redefines everything about life and how we live,
and how we can deal with our fear, and all that confronts us.

Jesus came, died, and rose again from the dead, conquering the grave,
so that we might have life **more abundantly, now and forever more.**

But the Bible is not promising that because we know and trust God,
we will be spared from life's difficulties, trials or troubles.

The promise that can overcome and conquer our fear and insecurities
is that the Lord will never abandon us to face troubles on our own.

God's promise & presence will sustain, & bring us through to victory,
because God will accomplish **some good, growth & blessing**,
even when our world seems to be crashing down around us.

Because Jesus has been raised,

our fearful concerns about life's dangers & dreads are overthrown.

Now if this promise was **only** the assurance of our eternal salvation,
then the resurrection would still be incredibly good news ----

in that regardless of whatever happens in this life,

the sure, eternal & wonderful KOG awaits us when we die ...

... and that alone would help dispel our fear and despair in this life.

But our hope is far more than just a long and distant promise of heaven

for Jesus has also promised to be with us now, here and today,

present with us in whatever our current situation in life ...

...& that truth empowers hope over any fear that might make us tremble.

Consider the truth Jesus promised just before he left, Matt. 28:20,

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

I am with you, always, even when you've reached the end of your rope.

I am still with you, even when you're defeated & lost,

and at the end of your strength, courage and tenacity.

I will still be with you even when your confidence falters,

even after your vigor and your determination have all ended,

yes, even though discouraged, **I'll always still be with you.**

I am with you when you face upheaval, danger, turmoil and trouble,

with you when everything is going wrong and headed toward disaster.

I am with you always & forever, with you **even past the very end.**

Sometimes amid tragedy I've heard, "So, where is God in all this?"

or in bitter complaint, "No loving God would allow this to happen."

But the truth is, if we look, **we'll see & feel God's presence & power**

far more amid our life's trouble, destruction and disasters

then we noticed before when everything was easy and calm.

God's power & promises are present not just during the good times,

but **serves as our hope & strength through times of terror & fear**

with great power to sustain us all through this mortal life.

Easter celebrates God's presence that comforts and enables us

to live in hope beyond all our fear, pain and loss in this world.

Jesus came, died, and rose again from the dead

so that we might have life more abundantly, now **and forever more,**

and this is our hope and the truth that sustains us, Romans 8,

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything

else? For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor anything else in all

creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Although I cannot prove beyond any doubt with scientific evidence

to a committed skeptic **that Jesus really was raised from the dead,**

I do absolutely believe in **the bodily resurrection of Christ,**

not just as a metaphor or vision of hope, **but as a living presence**

because in my own life I have experienced the risen Lord Jesus,

and because of the way my life and how I choose to live my life

were so radically changed by God's power, presence & grace.

Since I let Easter and God's love instead of fear to **define my life**,
I've found that the closer and more faithfully I walk with God,
the more my experiences of God and faith has **overcome my fear**.

By the power of the resurrection as demonstrated through Christ,
God has revealed his power & promise to save us and to transform us,
which gives us renewed hope over our every worry and fear,
restoring to us **the abundance & blessings God intends**.

When Jesus touches our lives, his gracious presence gives us hope.

His love empowers us to let go of our fearful and broken pasts,
freeing us and releasing us from whatever fear restrains us
to live a future that is filled with promise, joy and hope.
Through the risen Christ our defeats, wounds and brokenness,
our failures and mistakes can be healed and be fully resolved.

Today we celebrate God's gifts and blessings, and new possibilities.

**There's nothing to fear for God is still very much at work,
still seeking the lost and transforming human lives,
and even better, inviting us to join-in & participate.**

Easter resurrection isn't just about what happens after we're dead
but it's how God's love and grace, God's power and compassion
can make a difference **now** in our lives and in who we are,
in our relationships, in the hope & joy we live in all we do.

Easter is our wonderful reminder, that as it turns out,
**there really is more love, more mercy and grace in God
then there is evil, death and destruction in the world.**

Our Lord knows all about our struggles and suffering,
and by his gracious love, his victory is our victory,
as the story & resurrection of Jesus **continues in us!**

As the psalmist reminds us, Psalm 118:1,5-6,14

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place. With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me? The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.