

“Do Not Fear; Laughing Our Way Into More Life”

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Script: Matthew 28:1-10

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In one of his stories, David Sedaris describes being in a French language class while living in Paris. The classroom was filled with people learning French from all over the world... he describes them as “an Italian nanny, two chatty Poles, and a pouty, plump Moroccan woman who had grown up speaking French and had enrolled in the class hoping to improve her spelling.” She knew all the right answers of course, and often jumped in with her know-it-all attitude and responses.

The teacher was leading the class through the proper use of the word *one*, as in “**What does one do on Easter?**” While a couple of the students struggled with finding the right string of words, the Moroccan woman piped up, “**What’s an Easter?**” Growing up in a Muslim country, she had no idea what Easter was.

One of the guys from Poland started to explain in French to the best of his ability: “It is a party for the little boy of God who calls his self Jesus and... oh darn,” he faltered and his fellow Pole came to the rescue. “He call his self Jesus and then he die one day on two...morsels of lumber...” The rest of the class then jumped in, offering bits of information that, as David Sedaris put it, “would have given the pope an aneurysm.”

“He die one day and then go above my head to live with your father.”

“He weared of himself the long hair and after he die, the first day he come back here for to say hello to the peoples.”

“He nice, the Jesus.”ⁱ

When confronted with describing and putting meaning to something as wild and mysterious as the resurrection, we find that our words are clumsy and inadequate. The resurrection is beyond our categories, our thoughts, our minds. I have this temptation every Easter to simply read the story and sit down instead of preaching, out of fear that whatever words I can string together will sound as clumsy and hallow as those in David Sedaris’ French class; “...the first day he come back here for to say hello to the peoples.” My embarrassment threshold is fairly high, so here goes.

Let’s begin with that first morning. Mary Magdalene and another Mary take that dark path towards the burial grounds in the cool morning air. No sooner than they arrive and things begin to get chaotic—earthquakes, angels rolling stones from a tomb, guards sent for the purpose of guarding the dead become like the dead. They are so filled with fear that they shut down, either in fainting or faking their death. In this short story we have four references to fear—debilitating fear. The Angel encourages our Marys with the standard greeting “Do not be afraid”, which allows them to not faint or run for their lives.

Fear. Fear puts our bodies into a heightened state... heart rate increases, breathing becomes more rapid, our pupils dilate, we break out in a sweat, and we may have a tingling or dizzy sensation. Adrenaline is released into our system, enabling us to protect ourselves or get away from whatever danger is present. We all know about fear don’t we? Imagined threats to real ones... from snakes to heights, random

violence, public speaking, to diseases, bridges falling to stock market corrections...we know fear. We even name our wars against a form of fear— not so much because it is descriptive, but because it mobilizes...rallies, motivates. The politics of fear works... for a while.

Fear is a healthy, normal, useful response for the most part... but fear ultimately is toxic. The shock to our systems comes with a price and to live in continual fear and danger leads to a twisted experience and perception of the world, as some of our service men and women are discovering as they return from Iraq and Afghanistan. Their bodies and minds are certainly part of the price that is being paid, and will be paid.

Fear is also toxic in that it narrows our mind's vision— our focus is condensed, we see fewer options for dealing with situations, we regress in our available responses; fight or flight... or faint (as our guards chose), which is a form of denial I suppose. Think about how much fear has sapped the vitality of your life. What are you frightened of? How has fear kept you from abundant life?

Fight, flight or faint. Note that laughing isn't one of the options fear offers. In a little known play by Eugene O'Neill titled "Lazarus Laughed" we catch a glimpse of the option of laughter offered by Christ's resurrection.

The play begins, or picks up, where the Biblical story leaves off. You may remember that Lazarus was the friend that Jesus called back from the dead. He'd been buried for four whole days when Jesus came to the village of Bethany, had the stone rolled back from the tomb, and gave him back the gift of life. As the curtain goes up, Lazarus is seen stumbling out of the dark, blinking into the sunlight. And after the grave clothes are taken off of him he begins to laugh a gentle, soft laugh; nothing bitter, nothing derisive, an embracing, astonishing, welcoming sound. The very first thing he does is to embrace Jesus with gratitude. Then he begins to embrace his sisters and the other people who were gathered there.

He has a very clear look in his eye, nothing far away. It's as if he's seeing the world about him for the very first time. He reaches over and pats the earth very affectionately. He looks up at the sky, at the trees, at the neighbors as if he had never seen them before, as if he is overwhelmed by the incredible alrightness of the way everything is. The very first words he utters are the words, "Yes, yes, yes," as if to embrace reality as it is being discovered all over again.

In the play he makes his way back to his house and the whole village of Bethany is awash with wonder. Finally somebody gets the courage to ask what was on everybody's mind. "**Lazarus, tell us what it's like to die. What lies on the other side of this boundary that none of us have crossed?**"

At that point, Lazarus begins to laugh even more intensely and then he says, "**There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy.**" He continues, "**Death is not the way it appears from this side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos. It is, rather, a portal through which we move into everlasting growth and everlasting life.**" He then says, "**The One that meets us there is the same generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the One who gave us our birth. Not because we deserved it but because that generous One wanted us to be and therefore there is nothing to fear in the next realm. *The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty.* It is a portal through which we move into greater and finer life. Therefore, there is nothing to fear. Our great agenda is to learn to accept, to learn to trust. We are put here to learn to love more fully. There is only life. There is no death.**" And with that his laughter began to fill the whole house in which he was staying.ⁱⁱ

The play goes on with the reaction of the authorities who are upset with Lazarus and eventually arrest him. Their controlling methods don't work with him because he's lost his fear. Imagine how your life would be transformed without fear.

Jesus' words to our two Marys on that first Easter morning was "Do not be afraid." He, too, would say, **"There is only life. There is only laughter. There is only the joy and the mercy of God."**ⁱⁱⁱ It is God's good pleasure to give us the Kingdom... abundant life, and the resurrection proclaims that death and sin no longer are barriers to that life— at least on God's side. We must only accept this truth and reality. **"There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more than God already loves us and nothing we can do to make God stop loving us. If the killing of God's beloved Son did not break the affection that God had for creation, then we can be sure that God's goodness and mercy is greater than anything we have done or failed to do. Therefore the fear of death is replaced by that sense of adventure that we experience as we pass across into the next realm."**^{iv}

John Claypool, an Episcopal priest had a powerful dream one night a few years ago in which it seemed that he died physically. Like many of these experiences, he found himself moving in a cool, dark tunnel finally to emerge into what he calls a "kindly light."

In this light, he writes: I was accepted. I was embraced. I was welcomed. I saw no figure, but suddenly a voice spoke my name and said, "Welcome. I have some questions I want to ask you." At this, he tensed up, knowing as all of us do, that he hadn't lived a perfect life and he braced himself for what he expected would be a catalog of sins. But the voice said: "Can you weep for all the pain you've caused others and you've caused yourself; for the way you've abused power or neglected power; for the things you've done that you wish you hadn't done and the things you have left undone you wish you had done?"

He didn't answer, but let himself feel the deep regret and sadness that came over him as he remembered his life. But then the voice said, "Let me ask you a second thing. Can you laugh at all the funny stories that you heard, all the hilarious things that you've witnessed, and the good things that have happened?"

He writes that his response was that "I began to think about all of the goodness and mercy that I've experienced. A great sense of laughter began to well up deep from within me and it seemed as if God Himself was laughing about me. But then when the laughter had died down the voice said, 'I have another question to ask you. **Do you want any more of it, this life that I want to give you?** Do you want more of it?'

I remember thinking there's nothing automatic about this answer. Here's the pain of life. Here's the wonder of life. Do I want more of this bittersweet reality that I have experienced? From somewhere deep within me the words rose up, **"Yes, yes, I do want more of it."**

And with that the light said, **"Welcome. That's what I want to give you. It is my good pleasure to give you life abundant. Therefore, enter into the joy of your Lord."** With that, in the dream, he seemed to plunge further and deeper into a great ocean of light.^v

Ultimately there is nothing to fear— that is the message of this morning. We can live life abundant, if only we choose to accept it...say yes, we want more of it. Death is no longer the fear monger that hinders life. Sin, while it may tear at our lives, certainly doesn't hinder our communion with God. **The resurrection work that God will bring about in our lives and souls is a transformation from death and sin into life itself.** God seeks to give it to us... now and after we leave this place. But we must desire it...want more of it...trust it... and then plunge ever deeper the ocean of light.

Near the end of his life, Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote beautifully about his sense of the life God is seeking to give beyond— **which actually brings it into our time and space:**

It is the great mystery of human life that old grief passes gradually into quiet, tender joy. The mild serenity of age takes the place of the riotous blood of youth. I bless the rising sun each day, and, as before, my heart sings to meet it, but now I love even more its setting, its long slanting rays and the soft, tender, gentle memories that come with them, the dear images from the whole of my long, happy life—and **over all the divine truth, softening, reconciling, forgiving!** My life is ending, I know that well, but every day that is left me I feel how my earthly life is in touch with a new infinite, unknown, but approaching life, the nearness of which sets my soul quivering with rapture, my mind glowing, and my heart weeping with joy.

So be it. Amen.

ⁱDavid Sedaris, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, pp.174-177

ⁱⁱ Description by Revd John Claypool, *Easter and the Fear of Death*, 30 Good Minutes,

http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Claypool_4024.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Revd John Claypool, *Easter and the Fear of Death*, 30 Good Minutes,

http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Claypool_4024.htm

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.