

SERMON EASTER B SUNDAY 2021

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1. Fear is something that we have all felt this past year. Fear of a foreign virus that not only could make us sick and possibly kill but also the fact that it forced us into lockdowns, which elevated not just fear of the virus but also the economic turmoil that we are now facing.

This has produced for many feelings of anxiety and worry and for some, outright fear. These emotions as we know are paralyzing. Everything becomes focused on that moment, all other thoughts disappear. As disturbing as it may be, we also know fear is not always a negative emotion but also a motivating one. It spurs us to action, and makes us do things we may not normally have done, such as make vaccines in record time. But fear it also freezes us, immobilizes us. Fear then is an emotion that can be beneficial or detrimental.

The word fear appears throughout the scriptures. One famous line is 'the fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom' found in Psalm 9 verse 10. The concept of fearing God is now an unfashionable one. And perhaps for good reason.

2. Years of austere Christianity that some of you may have been subjected to growing up was neither good for the soul or particularly helpful. It was usually used to instill fear in children from an early age that if they were not good boys or girls something bad might happen to them, and maybe they'll even go to hell if they're not careful.

But with anything, when times change and we 'move on' we often throw out the baby with the bathwater as the saying goes. We have seen this happen with so many other aspects of our cultural life. At funerals the whole emphasis is now on wanting to celebrate the life, which is all good and true. But there must also be recognition that someone has died, and it is okay to weep, and to feel sadness. We see it in our national life, with the increasing pressure to make days such as Good Friday a trading day. In one sense the battle between secularism and faith has been lost a long time ago. We are no longer a Christian nation. But we must be cautious at throwing our whole cultural and religious past to the side, recognizing that ultimately we are where we are because of that past.

And so it is with the concept of the fear of God. We are, as has been heard this morning confronted with fear in those

last lines of Mark's account of the resurrection, 'they were afraid.' Afraid of what we may ask? What do they do then?

Well Mark's Gospel is peculiar, because it actually has two endings. This is due to there being two different ancient manuscripts with two different endings. One is short and sweet, the other details Jesus appearing to his disciples, commissioning them and then ascending.

3.

And as much as this 'rounds of' the story I actually prefer the more abrupt and enigmatic ending that we have had today. We are left with these two women who have come to anoint Jesus fleeing in fear. But we notice it is not a fear that can be characterised as negative, but rather a fear that is described as amazement. These woman are amazed at what has happened, their fear is balanced with awe, and so they provide for us a model of how we approach the resurrection story this morning. For we cannot face the resurrection events without being both in awe and in fear. Awe at the mystery of the resurrection and fearful of its implications. I say mystery for as much as we may want to try and rationalize these events, we find it increasingly difficult. For to bring 21st century empirical reasoning to the resurrection of Jesus only leaves us wanting.

Someone who understood this tension between science vs faith more than anyone was a neurosurgeon by the name of Paul Kalanithi. Kalanithi is now famous for penning his autobiography called '*when breath becomes air*'. It is a book which details his own diagnoses of lung cancer, his rediscovery of his Christian faith and his thoughts on life as he approached death. Kalanithi had an incredible mind. He graduated from Stanford with a B.A. and M.A. in English literature and a B.A. in human biology. He earned an M.Phil in the history and philosophy of science and medicine from Cambridge and graduated cum laude from the Yale School of Medicine, where he was inducted into the Alpha Omega Alpha national medical honor society. He returned to Stanford to complete his residency training in neurological surgery and a postdoctoral fellowship in neuroscience, and received the American Academy of Neurological Surgery's highest award for resident research.

4.

As Kalanithi got news of his cancer diagnosis he realized that his atheism could not sustain him. As he writes in his autobiography:

Although I had been raised in a devout Christian family, where prayer and Scripture readings were a nightly ritual,

I, like most scientific types, came to believe in the possibility of a material conception of reality, an ultimately scientific worldview that would grant a complete metaphysics, minus outmoded concepts like souls, God, and bearded white men in robes. I spent a good chunk of my twenties trying to build a frame for such an endeavor. The problem, however, eventually became evident: to make science the arbiter of metaphysics is to banish not only God from the world but also love, hate, meaning — to consider a world that is self-evidently not the world we live in. That's not to say that if you believe in meaning, you must also believe in God. It is to say, though, that if you believe that science provides no basis for God, then you are almost obligated to conclude that science provides no basis for meaning and, therefore, life itself doesn't have any. In other words, existential claims have no weight; all knowledge is scientific knowledge.

5.

What Kalanithi is stating here, is that sense that we all get when faced with the claims of the resurrection story. We can either approach it with the scientism of the scientific method or we can approach it like those first woman who came to the tomb, with simple awe. This is not to say that we don't engage with the scriptures in a meaningful and academic way, but rather we must acknowledge that

scripture simply does not provide us with the sort of scientific material that most claim is the only thing that is meaningful. 6.

It is like the many events in the Gospels were a frustrated Jesus' metaphorical language receives literal interpretation from his followers. The great example being John chapter 4 and Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well.

Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Meanwhile, the disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." So the disciples said to one another, "Could someone have brought him something to eat?"

We may find ourselves chuckling at the disciple's ignorance. But are we not often guilty of turning the biblical events into some sort of scientific description of

the events that took place 5000-2000 years ago? This is not to say that the resurrection did not take place, but rather to acknowledge that we must approach it with humility and with awe, focusing on what it means for us here and now. As Kalanithi finishes 'I returned to the central values of Christianity -- sacrifice, redemption, forgiveness -- because I found them so compelling.'

7.

And so perhaps it is this same compulsion that drives you to come here this Sunday morning to church. You could have quite easily stayed in bed, slept in, gone out for brunch, or gone for a walk. But you chose to come here because you too are compelled by what the resurrection says. That death is not the end, that mercy trumps justice, that love is stronger than hate, that there is ultimate meaning and purpose in life. To that, I say we should be in awe like those first women. And like them finish the story that the original text of Mark's Gospel leaves out. For we, like them, are also called to proclaim that good news to others. We too, are to move beyond our fear and awe and to proclaim that truly he has risen, he has risen indeed, Alleluia.