

Driven by Fear or Faith?

Matthew 28:1-20

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Bethany Church

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It is exciting to gather today. During Lenten Season, some of us went on a tongue-fast. We fasted from gossip, complaining, dishonesty-exaggeration, negative-judging words, and profane or degrading words. I found myself asking God for forgiveness several times as I found that my heart wasn't pure, but I also found God was working in my heart. Some people reported their tongue-fast had positive effects on friends and relatives. God worked in many of us.

Next Sunday April 19th, I want to speak about another work of God at Bethany. I'll share a vision God is giving to our church. We also will have missionaries here, and two of our ministry leaders will present a project. The last Sunday of April, invite a friend to worship who is struggling with illness or injury. We will hold a healing service. You may be surprised by what you learn and experience.

Today, we are so excited about Easter. Yet, we want to be sensitive and hospitable, so I read some information on how help visitors be more comfortable. An un-churched sociologist studied some of our churches. He found rituals and code words that aren't always understood by visitors. He devised a list of definitions for visitors. I hope this list is helpful:

Pew: is a medieval torture device designed to impart sainthood while you sit

Bulletin: is your worship receipt

Choir: is a group of people whose singing allows the rest of congregation to lip-sync and sound good

Hymn: is an act of praise usually sung in a key featuring the very highest voices in the congregation

Processional: (we did this last week) is a dignified way of helping the choir, the pastor, worship leaders and late parishioners find their seats after the service begins

Ushers: are the congregation's most optimistic and positive individuals who see every one of us as slim and trim enough to fit together in the same pew

He apparently did his study during the Christmas season. I thought you might be interested in two additional terms:

Magi: the most famous trio to attend a baby shower

Manger: the Bible's way of showing us that holiday travel has always been rough

I'm not sure the definitions lowered your anxiety. I do know that God's love and power revealed in Easter can make a difference in how anxious or comfortable we are. Easter has changed the outlook, the mood and the motivations of so many.

We just read Matthew 28. It gives us a condensed version, a short synopsis of what happened that first Easter. When I read it, I was struck by the word *fear*. I found *fear*, its synonym, or its implicit presence 7 times in our reading. Matthew reports that some women went to Jesus tomb at dawn. They observed a violent earthquake and the appearance of an angel. Matthew writes:

The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.
(Matthew 28:4, NIV)

I think that is not just fear; that is paralyzing fear. Would you call it "faint with fear?" The women were also fearful. When the angel spoke to the woman, he said first, "Do not be afraid." The angel announced that the tomb was empty, that Jesus is risen! (He is risen indeed!) After the angel instructed them to tell the disciples, the women left. The Bible says:

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy. (Matthew 28:8, NIV)

The women still suffered from fear, but their fear was mixed with joy. Their bodies were electric with emotion. They were not faint, paralyzed, or hindered by fear. Hope was moving their feet. Their attitudes, their thinking and their actions were all driven by hope.

Suddenly, they were met by Jesus. He is risen. (He is risen indeed.) He said, “Do not be afraid.” He told the women to continue with their mission, to inform the disciples, to tell them where to congregate so he can meet with them. He did not want fear to stop their mission. He did not want their lack of experience, knowledge, or understanding to stop them from sharing what they know. I wonder how many of us are stopped in our mission, stopped in our potential, stopped in our growth because of fear. We see ourselves as lacking experience, knowledge and understanding. We see ourselves as inadequate and fail to act because of it. We hold back rather than run with the blessings we have. Well, the women acted on their blessings. They were not dominated by fear. They were moved by faith.

The courageous soldiers, on the other hand, were waking up from their fright. Guess what? They were still frightened. They were afraid they’d be in trouble. The chief priests were also afraid. They were afraid of the news that Jesus is risen. (He is risen indeed). They devised a plan to discount the news. All these wise men were thinking and acting out of fear. They were living out of fear, fear of loss, fear of death, fear of disrespect. Their fear was *dominant* and put them at odds with God.

Subservient fear can be useful. It can prevent us from foolish actions and ill-considered risks. However, as creatures of God, we are to be led by faith rather than fear.

Daniel Ruettiger grew up dreaming of playing football at the University of Notre Dame. While achieving some success with his local high school football team, Ruettiger lacked the grades and money to attend Notre Dame, and talent and physical size. He was 5’ 6”. He took a job in a local steel mill where his father worked; but when his best friend was killed in an explosion there, he left to pursue his dream at Notre Dame. His father warned him, “Ruettigers don’t belong at college.” Failing to get admitted, Ruettiger, nicknamed Rudy, enrolled in a junior

college and played football there. In the final semester of eligibility he gained admission to Notre Dame. With relentless effort during tryouts and practice, he convinced the Notre Dame coaches to give him a spot on the practice squad. He never dressed for a game or sat on the sideline until the last home game of 1975, his senior year. His family and friends came just to see him sit on the sideline in uniform. His teammates so inspired by his faith and effort, petitioned their coach to put him in at the end of the game. They began a chant, “Rudy, Rudy...” that eventually filled the stadium. The coach conceded and put Rudy in for the last plays of the game. Rudy made a tackle to end the game, and his teammates swarmed him, lifted him to their shoulders and carried him off the field. In all its storied history, Rudy is the only Notre Dame football player to be carried off the field by teammates.

Rudy’s actions so inspired his teammates, friends and family that (1) all his brothers ended up going to college and (2) the University of Notre Dame allowed the 1993 filming of his story on their campus. The administration had allowed only one other film to be shot on campus, the 1940 feature on the life of Knute Rockne, All American.

Life is meant to be lived by faith. But there must be reason for faith. I don’t know why Daniel Ruettiger believed. Something beyond logic had to touch him. He had every reason not to believe. On the other hand, because of Easter we have every reason to believe. Easter is not merely an inspiring story. It is the true work of God on your behalf. It is the work of God so that you overcome fear, you overcome sin, you overcome failure, and you overcome death.

Jesus calls you to a life of significance. He calls you to be his disciple. He knows the work is daunting. He knows there are enemies. He knows there are hardships. He faced evil. He understands the fear, but Jesus is risen (He is risen indeed). He will be with you. You can count on him. He will touch your heart to believe and do things beyond your imagination... if

you will actually believe him. You'll personally know you're loved and favored. You have reason to believe, reason to press on; and you will have occasion to do the impossible. Do you believe Jesus is risen (he is risen indeed)? What will define you? What will drive you, fear or faith?