

As I studied our gospel reading for today, I started thinking about fear. I have been thinking about the way fear moves us to focus on security issues, and the way fear and security play such an important role in our lives, controlling so much of our behavior. It is fear that drives us to intently focus on and invest in **various** forms of security. If we listen to the daily news we will inevitably hear about issues and concerns regarding global security, national security, security within our community, security in our homes and our own personal security. Security issues have become so important to us they have evolved into big business in our culture. Security is used as a marketing tool for cars, tires, homes, internet resources, investment banking, politics, travel – the list goes on and on. Everyone is interested in keeping us safe. Cell phones, security systems, airport security lines, getting the right medical tests before or after the age of 50 – just about everything can be **sold** as a way to keep us free from threats, a way to keep us safe. And, while I do **not** want to minimize the need for security, I do want to suggest this incessant focus adds to the fear and anxiety that already permeates our culture and our very lives.

Well, in the last chapters of Matthew's gospel, we find people who were **fearful** and intently focused on **security** concerns. **Security** seems

to be on everyone's mind. When Jesus was betrayed, it was temple security personnel armed with swords and clubs who came to arrest him. As this happened, the disciples sought **their** security in the cover of darkness, deserting Jesus and fleeing the garden. Peter sought security and safety in a courtyard by trying to keep a safe distance **from** Jesus while following what happened to Jesus during his trial. And, after Jesus was **safely** dead, the chief priests still felt this immense **need** for security and asked Pilate to place guards at the sealed tomb where Jesus' body was laid to rest. So, Pilate told **his** security detail – the soldiers – to “make that tomb as secure as you can,” and he placed twenty-four-hour guards to keep watch.

And guess what! It did not work, and it does not work! It did not work for Peter who ended up denying Jesus three times. And it did not work for the chief priests who tried to secure and seal Jesus in a tomb. It did not work because Jesus, the Word made flesh, **cannot and will not** be contained. All attempts at achieving security were shattered when the very foundations of the earth shook. And, by a power **greater** than **all** attempts to achieve security, **Jesus was raised!**

When the very foundations of the earth shook as tectonic plates shifted, even Pilate's security detail fell to the ground in fear. As the

soldiers become like dead men, paralyzed by fear, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are greeted by the angel who says, “**Don’t 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.”

The women then go, and what is **so** interesting is that they leave the tomb with both fear **and** joy! While they are joyful, an element of fear has not left them, and they apparently do not exactly feel secure and safe. You see, they are living an experience in which the very foundation of the earth under their feet has shaken them to the core. Their dear friend who was dead has not stayed dead!! Talk about **not** feeling secure and safe! And, as they run to tell the disciples, who should run into **them** but Jesus. Jesus, their **risen** Lord stands before them and says to them, “**Do not be afraid.**” They encounter the risen Christ and hear him say, “Do not be afraid,” and it is the very **last** time in Matthew’s gospel that we hear **anything** about fear.

As the women encounter the risen Christ, it becomes very clear to them that reality **itself** had changed. The Rev. Dr. Mary Hinkle Shore describes this change in the women and all of Jesus' disciples by saying:

As the first Christians came to recognize the risen Christ, they experienced boldness and freedom of speech that surprises those of us who read their stories. It is as if **their** security came from the inside out. They were not afraid of people who scoffed at their claims. They were not afraid of authorities who ordered them to stop speaking of Jesus. They were free from what the neighbors thought about them and free from what the established power structure could do to them.

Now, we know that the disciples did face threats and persecution following Christ's resurrection. The history of the early church indicates many of them were killed for professing Christ as Savior and proclaiming their faith. However, after experiencing Christ's resurrection, even the threats made against their lives by those who were in power did not own them **or define** them. Fear no longer defined the way they lived **or** their proclamation of the good news. And what is so amazing is that even all the mistakes they had made, all of their fear induced foolishness and prior cowardly behavior, was met by the risen Christ who **did** meet them in Galilee. Their encounter with the risen Christ **freed** them from all that **had** been, and their reality was forever changed. And, even more, the risen Christ promised to be with them to the end of the age.

So, on this Easter morning, what might that kind of freedom mean for you? How does this good news free **you** from the fear that binds and imprisons you? How does this good news change the way you hear the daily news reports? How does this good news change the way you welcome strangers and those who are different, those you might consider other? How does this good news transform all that defines **you**? How does this good news transform **this** faith community and the way we live in the greater **Okemos** community and the world? How does this good news transform the way this faith community looks to the future? The risen Christ stands before us saying, “**Do not be afraid!**”

Because of Easter, we know the foundation of all that once was has been shaken and God **is** creating a new heaven and a new earth. And, because of Easter our lives are **secure** and held with Christ in the very God of all creation. **Do not be afraid**, because we know a Savior who died on the cross to **break** the power of **everything** that threatens to enslave or oppress or distort or destroy our humanity. **Do not be afraid**, because of Easter we know a God who takes all our pain and sorrow and suffering and sadness and loss and even death and turns it all into new **life**. **Do not be afraid**, because of Easter we believe the new life that came into being on that early morning two thousand years ago will one day transform

everything and **everyone**. **Do not be afraid**, because of Easter we believe in a God who brings hope out of hopelessness and new life out of death. **Do not be afraid**, because of Easter we believe in a God who is working to bring grace and peace and mercy and love and justice and freedom and joy and life into **every** life. **Do not be afraid**, because of Easter **and** because we believe in a God who raised Jesus from the dead, we know that even death does **not** have the last word. God alone has the last word. **You are secure!! We** are secure!!

Do not be afraid! Because of Easter **we are secure, and our future is secure!** For the powers of death have been defeated **already** and no matter how violently they rage and no matter what power or authority they try to claim, Christ has **already** won the victory! **Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!**