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I have my first memory of being afraid when I was five years old. Fifty-eight years ago on April 11, 1965, it was Palm Sunday, and I remember my parents standing at the window in our kitchen looking out into the back yard, commenting on the dark clouds in the distance that appeared to have a funnel shape. We headed to the basement, waiting for the danger to pass. I wasn't quite sure what we were hiding from, but I learned that tornadoes were something to fear. The news reported about the Palm Sunday tornadoes and how they had ravaged six midwestern states, including Indiana and left a trail of 271 dead people and 1500 injuries. For several years afterward, I felt fear on every Palm Sunday, thinking that tornadoes were somehow connected to this day. The feelings of fear remained associated with the holy day of Palm Sunday.

Maybe you can remember moments of fear that remained with you for months or years, for somehow this emotion becomes embedded in us. It's almost as though the emotion of fear highlights the details of the events, prompting us to recall

details many years later—the sounds, sights, maybe even smells.

Fear is a normal emotion, and one that helps us survive dangerous events by prompting us to get away from things that could harm us. Fear also emerges when we don't understand something, when something mysterious enters our day, as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary experienced when they traveled to the tomb after Jesus' death. Although the Gospel writers Luke and Mark suggested that the women came to anoint Jesus' body with spices, Matthew doesn't offer any explanation why they visited the tomb. He just states they went to *see* the *tomb*—not the body. Maybe it's like when we go to the cemetery of a deceased loved one. We don't expect to see anyone. We go to mourn. To see the grave marker. To say a few words. To remember stories.

But the two women experienced more than a few memories, for they felt an earthquake, and they saw a dazzling bright angel, two guards shaking in fear, and a stone rolled away from an empty tomb. I imagine they would have felt fear at the occurrence

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of such a mysterious event, but the angels suggested, “I know you’re looking for Jesus, but do not be afraid. Jesus isn’t here. He’s been raised from the dead. Go and tell the others!”

Do not be afraid? I don’t know about you, but I think I would be terrified of such an encounter, something so mysterious and unexplainable.

Whether or not a literal earthquake occurred, the women’s worldview had been shaken up, for something earth-shattering had happened. How would one go and tell others about such an event when barely grasping what had just happened?

God often enters our world in surprising ways and at the oddest moments, which makes it difficult to explain to others. The birth of a baby in a place where cattle lived? How surprising! A teacher who broke religious rules and told stories about mustard seeds and birds of the air? How odd! A man who ate with unpopular sinners and other outcasts. How scandalous!

One commentary about the visit to the tomb noted that the story focuses on the women.

They are commissioned twice—once by the angel (28:7) and once by the risen Jesus (28:10)—to proclaim the resurrection gospel. It is not the elite and powerful, the successful and victorious, the males, who are entrusted with this proclamation. It is two women, marginal in a male-dominated society, who receive the identity as preachers and become central to the next chapter of this gospel story.¹

God enters the world in surprising ways. Nothing to be afraid of, but something to be in awe of.

The Greek word φόβος [*phobos* /*fob*-os] is often translated as *fear*, as Matthew used in describing the women when they left the tomb. The sentence is often translated as “So they left the tomb quickly with fear.” The rest of the sentence also includes the words “and great joy.” Fear and joy together? When I’m afraid, I’m not often filled with joy—often just the opposite. So why does Matthew pair these emotions together? Fear and joy?

The interesting thing about the Greek word *phobos* is that it can also be translated as “reverence,” as in an act of worship. The women seem to display this meaning of the word at the

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empty tomb, for when Jesus appeared to them and echoed the phrase of the angels, “Do not be afraid,” the women bowed to the ground, placing their heads near his feet in an act of worship.

When we encounter a situation we don’t understand, we may experience fear, but we may also experience awe, reverence.

While looking into the sky at night and sensing the overwhelming vastness of the universe, one might feel *phobos*—reverence, mystery.

When standing beside a waterfall cascading hundreds of feet into the river below, one might experience *phobos*—reverence, awe.

When gathered with a community of faith listening to the music and offering prayer, one might feel *phobos*—worship, inspiration.

Even though we followed Jesus this week through the struggles—from the entry on Palm

Sunday, to the Last Supper with his disciples, to the arrest in the garden, to the accusations and trial, to the execution on a cross—we know on this Easter morning the rest of the story. That’s something a family experienced

while watching the Easter story on television. The little girl was deeply moved. As Jesus was tortured and killed, tears rolled down her cheeks. She was absolutely silent until after Jesus had been taken down from the cross and put into the tomb. Then she suddenly grinned and shouted, “Now comes the good part!”²

On this Easter morning, now comes the good part as we visit the tomb and discover it is empty and we encounter the risen Christ. Along with the first women who visited the tomb, may we also experience *phobos*—reverence, awe—and hear the words of Jesus and the angels spoken to us: Do not be afraid.

² Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking* (p. 854). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #799.

¹ Green, J. B., Long, T. G., Powery, L. A., Rigby, C. L., & Sharp, C. J., eds. (2019). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year A: Lent through Pentecost* (First edition, Vol. 2). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.