

## BECAUSE HE LIVES

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Isaiah 12:2-6; Romans 6:3-6; Matthew 28:1-10

“Fear not!” says the angel. “Be not afraid!”

*Really?*

“Don’t be afraid!”

*Right...*

...that’s about as effective as telling someone to “calm down.”

When was the last time you calmed down just because somebody told you to?

Well, okay, some of you have a lot of wisdom. Maybe you’re more highly evolved, or more rational, than some of us, and so you do calm down when somebody tells you to, or maybe you just never get upset about anything?

But—if you *are* one of those rare, highly evolved people—think, then, of how effective it is when you tell somebody *else* to calm down: your kids, maybe, or your spouse, or someone at work?

So...what gets us upset? Really upset, I mean. Think about it.

Mostly, I’d say, we get really upset when we sense danger, a threat to us, or our family, or someone or something we care deeply about. And that’s why, when we’re upset, “Don’t be afraid!” makes no sense to us.

Because there’s a lot to be afraid of, isn’t there? And watching the TV news just makes it worse. Earthquakes, floods, global warming, wars and rumors of wars, crazy dictators, religious extremists (pick your flavor on that one), terrorists, joblessness, child abuse, human trafficking, gun violence—it doesn’t even matter what your politics might happen to be, there is so much to be afraid of in this world that I, for one, am grateful sometimes for denial—because if we really thought about all the danger all the time we’d none of us ever get out of bed in the morning. But then, if you stay in bed all the time, pretty soon you have some serious health problems...

And then there’s being a parent.

“Fear not!” says the angel.

But...what if my baby dies in delivery? What if she’s born with a fatal birth defect? What if *I* die? What can I do to protect my child? What if she dies in her crib? If I ever go out with my spouse, what danger could he be in? How can I know if she’s being abused? How will I tell if he’s on drugs? How can I pay for college? Will the economy tank? Will we be able to pay for everything our child will need? With all the pain and fear and cruelty and violence in the world, how can I protect my child? What were we *thinking*, to bring a child into this terrifying world?

Bill and Gloria Gaither were thinking just that. They were already famous in evangelical circles for their hymns, and you’d think their Christian faith guaranteed that they wouldn’t be afraid of anything. Well...

It was the late 1960s, they had two children already, and they were expecting a third. But this time, illness, family problems, financial uncertainties, the apparently never-ending and constantly escalating Vietnam war, racial tension and violence, drug abuse, air and water pollution—all the anxiety and fears of that era, came crashing down upon them. Gloria’s thoughts were overrun not with hope, or faith, let alone calm assurance; but with fear, doubt, and torment the more she pondered bringing a child into this insane and terrifying world.

As the Gaithers tell it, one night, “after a simple prayer by one of Bill’s close friends, the strength of the Holy Spirit” came to their aid. “The Resurrection of the Lord, in all its power, was reaffirmed,” they say, “in their hearts.” Suddenly, “all fear was gone.”

Bill and Gloria *knew* that the future, in God’s hands, would be, in the long run, just fine. And when in due course their Benjamin was born, “Because He Lives,” that wonderful Easter Baptismal hymn, seemed almost to write itself.

*God sent His son, they called Him Jesus;  
He came to love, heal and forgive;  
He lived and died to buy my pardon,  
An empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives!*

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,  
Because He lives, all fear is gone,  
Because I know He holds the future,  
And life is worth the living,  
Just because He lives!*

*How sweet to hold a newborn baby,  
And feel the pride and joy he gives;  
But greater still the calm assurance:  
This child can face uncertain days because He Lives!*

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,  
Because He lives, all fear is gone;  
Because I know He holds the future,  
And life is worth the living,  
Just because He lives!*

What are *you* afraid of? We’re all afraid of something.

What does God promise the People of Israel, when their whole lives are collapsing before their eyes? When their country is overrun with Babylonian soldiers, when their children are taken from them and their elderly are abandoned to die? When their Temple is destroyed, and they are taken away in captivity?

*Surely God is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the LORD GOD  
is my strength and my might;  
God has become my salvation.*

At the bottom of it all, what are we afraid of? What do we want to deny, even at the very deathbed of a loved one?

We’re afraid of death—our own physical death, at the root of it, but all sorts of deaths, too, along the way. Death of our youth, death of a loved one, death of a beloved way of life or a cherished institution. Death of a poor one, one of God’s children, who has no food or shelter—so many all around the world, even right here.

And yet, we know, too, that There’s no Easter without Good Friday. Without death, we don’t get to Resurrection.

And in the ancient practice of the Church, we don’t even get to Easter morning without Easter Vigil the night before.

Have you ever been to an Easter Vigil? Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican—some of us have, I know, because by no means all of us grew up Presbyterian. And we can even do Easter Vigil in the Presbyterian church—did you know that it’s in our Book of Common Worship?

What happens in the Easter Vigil? We do a little of it in our 6:30 am service, for those of you who've gotten up that early, when we strike a new flame. Not a match, but a flint. Life from a stone, you see. Life from death.

On Easter Vigil in the early church, all those who had spent the whole of Lent in prayer and fasting, making themselves ready to renounce Satan and all his works, affirm the Apostles' Creed, and accept Baptism in the name of the Trinity, were finally, actually, baptized.

The congregation gathered as the celebrant struck that new fire. They spent the night praying with candles in the graveyard, then pounded hard on the church door.

They came in then, bearing the Light of Christ, while a single deacon, personifying the soul lost in darkness, stood in the shadows of the church, greeting the Light with the glorious song that begins *Exultet*:

***Exult, let them exult, the hosts of heaven,  
exult, let Angel ministers of God exult! ...***  
*On this, your night of grace, O holy Father,  
accept this candle, a solemn offering,  
the work of bees and of your servants' hands,  
an evening sacrifice of praise, ...  
for it is fed by melting wax,  
drawn out by mother bees  
to build a torch so precious.  
O truly blessed night,  
when things of heaven are wed to those of earth,  
and divine to the human...  
May this flame be found still burning  
by the Morning Star:  
the one Morning Star who never sets,  
Christ your Son,  
who, coming back from death's domain,  
has shed his peaceful light on humanity,  
and lives and reigns for ever and ever!*

Picture them now, listening together, reliving the whole sweep of Salvation History read in Scripture—God's saving acts in the lives of the faithful—from Noah to, yes, the Resurrection itself, and then, at last, they were baptized.

As they rose from the water, the first thing they saw was the Light of Christ held before them—that Christ candle of the Resurrection that had been lit with new fire and praised in song that very evening. And the first thing they tasted was the salt placed on their tongue: “You are the salt of the earth.”

How glorious for them was that first church service the next day, when for the first time they were allowed to stay for Communion, exchanged the Kiss of Peace, say the secret Prayer the Lord had taught the first disciples, and then, at last, eat and drink the Lord's Supper.

They were all adults back then, and full immersion was the rule. And nobody in those days had been to Holmes camp or West Meadow Beach or to the neighbor's pool—almost none of them in those days, including even fishermen, could swim. So when the waters closed over your head, it was pretty scary. They were “buried”—in the water, as Jesus, and all who bore his name, had been before.

“Fear not?” Impossible. But they pushed through—because only through pushing through their fears of death could they be truly members of the Resurrection body.

I don't know what kind of dying scares you the most, but for me, it's being suffocated. Buried alive. And for those folks, it was very much like that. Dirt or water, it didn't make much difference. Buried alive is buried alive.

It used to be knives that scared me most, until the first time I tried, in real water, getting out of a kayak I was actually pinned to, by a spray skirt, that is. I'd practiced plenty on land, and I knew what the steps were, but when I rolled over and was actually upside down under water, suddenly I panicked.

I thrashed around, overcome by fear. Forget about *hope*: all *brains* were gone. Everything I knew to do flew right out of my head, and I was terrified. I couldn't even tell myself to calm down, and if anybody was yelling, "Fear not!" I wasn't in any condition to hear them.

Well, as they say in the commercials, don't try this at home. You don't do this alone, either, and the experienced kayaker standing in the water beside me finally put a hand on my boat and rolled me back up again. I was too grateful to be embarrassed—at least for a few minutes.

But that's a pretty good metaphor for salvation, don't you think? Someone who's been there before—Jesus Christ—pulls us out of the deep, out of danger, out of fear. It doesn't help to try to reason with a drowning person, and only someone who's been through it knows that. Jesus has died, and has been raised from the dead. He doesn't waste time trying to teach us how, he just raises us.

Time enough to buy us a fishing pole, or advocate for clean water for the fish to swim in, or even feed us a fish—Jesus just *rescues* us, so we can *live another day* to "fish for people," whatever that means to each of us.

But back to that story of Baptism in the early church. That's what Paul means when he says we've been buried with Christ, and then, just like those catechumens so long ago, and just like me in my kayak in the Suffolk County Community College pool that January, we have been raised with Christ, *rescued by God in Christ*, the whole life and work and teachings of Jesus affirmed by God in the Resurrection; so, fear though we might, in fact, there is nothing to fear:

*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.  
And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD,  
call on God's name; make known God's deeds among the nations;  
proclaim that God's name is lifted up!*

*"Sing praises to the LORD, for the LORD has done gloriously!"  
let this be known in all the earth.  
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,  
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

Yes, the only certain thing in life is death—not even taxes are that certain, if you're poor, or rich, enough, that is—but, as Jesus says, who among us can add one elbows-length to our span of life by worrying? "Fear not," says Jesus, "Go and tell my brothers and sisters to go forth to their ordinary lives, for *there* they will see me." "Don't just cry, 'Lord, Lord,' but do the things I tell you to do!" "Fear not, for I am with you to the end of time."

*And then one day, I'll cross the river,  
I'll fight life's final war with pain;  
And then, as death gives way to victory,  
I'll see the lights of glory and I'll know He lives!*

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,  
Because He lives, all fear is gone;  
Because I know He holds the future,  
And life is worth the living,  
Just because He lives!*

AMEN.