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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Easter Sunday
Luke 24:1-12

“Keep Calm and Carry On”

A few years my ago kids spent almost every morning of their Spring Break watching all of the Star Wars movies. Now, I think I’m the only person on earth who hasn’t seen any of the Star Wars movies. But I know enough about them to know who Luke Skywalker is (and yes, I know who father is), R2D2, C3PO, and Yoda.

But I get a little fuzzy when the kids start talking about the “new” Star Wars characters.

“Who’s that guy?” I asked them one morning as they were totally zoned out in front of the TV.

“That’s Anakin Skywalker.” “Who’s that?” “That’s Luke’s Skywalker’s dad.” “But Darth Vader is his Dad,” I said. “He doesn’t become Darth Vader until Episode 3.” But he’s Darth Vader in the first Star Wars movie,” I said.

“Mom,” they said –like I’m the biggest moron on the face of the earth, “episodes 1,2, and 3 are prequels.” Ohhh.

Well, I may not know much about Star Wars but prequels I get. Because the Bible is one big prequel. We know the end before the beginning.

We know how the story is going to turn out. Whether you come to church every Sunday or only on Easter, you know the story of Easter.

The stone is rolled away from the tomb, an angel announces to women that Jesus isn’t there, he’s risen, and they go running off to tell people what they saw.

It’s an incredible story . . . and if you stop long enough to think about it you also realize how unbelievable it is.

But that’s the problem. We don’t stop long enough to think about how unbelievable it is. And we are so accustomed to hearing it, year after year after year . . .that it’s lost its power to take hold of us and really shake us up. We who have gotten used to thinking of Jesus as our good buddy and have made God as knowable and dependable as our breakfast cereal, hardly linger any more at the dreadful silence of the women with their faces in the dirt.

They were terrified! They threw themselves on the ground and stuck their faces in the dirt at the sight of the two angels. Everything the women thought was true about their

lives wasn't true anymore. They woke up that morning expecting to go and anoint Jesus' dead body but the day took a totally unexpected turn. Everything they had come to expect in life was suddenly and irrevocably turned upside down. Whatever happened to death and taxes being a sure thing? Now the only thing that was certain was taxes!

The first emotion on that first Easter wasn't joy (thought that would come later); it wasn't hope (though that too would come later); it was fear. Good old fashioned fear.

For those of you who like a little trivia with your sermons, here's a nugget for you: the word fear appears about 600 times in the Bible. I think that's a lot. And the word appears at very important moments.

- It's used first in Genesis when God makes a covenant with Abraham and tell him, "Do not be afraid, I am your shield."
- A few chapters later God tells Hagar, who is afraid her son will die, "Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy . . . and I will make a great nation of him."
- God appears to Isaac and says to him, "Do not be afraid, for I with you and will bless you . . ."

Do you hear the theme?

- When Moses is getting nervous about leading the people out of Egypt, God says, "Fear not. I will be with you."
- To anyone who faces death, the psalmist says, "Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

Jumping ahead to the New Testament, an angel says to startled shepherds, "Fear not."

And now, at the resurrection, "Fear not; he is risen! *He is risen indeed.*"

And yet, no matter how many times we hear that God is with us, we are afraid. Now, don't get me wrong, we have plenty to be fearful of: Losses in life, whether it's health or people or a job or place in it . . . all raise our fear factor. Threats to our national security or when a breach of security happens cause us to be fearful. And fear itself is not a bad thing. No where in the Bible do we read that fear is a bad thing.

But when fear paralyzes you to the point where you can't get your face out of the dirt, well, that's a problem.

When fear of failing prevents you from trying something new, that's a problem.

When fear of rejection keeps you from going out for the team, trying out for the part, or applying for the job, that's a problem.

When fear of intimacy prevents you from saying, "I love you," that's a problem.

Because it is fear that prevents us from looking for the living among the dead.
It's fear that reduces the scope of our lives.

It's fear that causes us to dream too small.

It's fear that causes us to put a period where God puts a comma.

It's fear that causes us to look into the empty tombs and say, "Yep, it's dead alright," because we're afraid that if we say, "I don't know, maybe there is a sign of life here," God might actually expect us to go and do something radically different with our lives!

Friends, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that most of us here stopped looking for the living among the dead a long time ago. The late Peter Gomes, who served for years as the chaplain at Harvard, said that fear, not sin, is the curse on human life. And in many ways, that is true.

We cling to former visions of ourselves or institutions, as if they might come back to life.

We grasp our loved ones too tightly, refusing to allow them to change, to become bigger or smarter or stronger.

We choose to stay with what we know in our hearts to be dead, because it is safer than venturing out on a new path.

Like the women on Easter morning, we want to tend to the corpses of long dead ideas or ideals.

But Easter will have none of that nonsense. Easter turns its back on fear; Easter shakes things up, big time. On Easter, Jesus gives us our lives back and sets us free from fear.

Why do you look for the living among the dead, the angels ask? Indeed, why do we? Because we are Easter people, and Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed.*

The Easter story is so unbelievable, that dare I suggest we live most of our lives as if it is. We play it too safe; we put periods in our lives where God would put a comma; we stop risking, and start believing that our mission in life is to play it safe.

But Easter is so unbelievable that it calls us to confront the challenges in our lives; calls us to write really great endings to really great stories; and to look for the living among the dead . . . how crazy does that sound? Is it any wonder the disciples told the women their tale was idle, which is a G-rated word for R-rated word Luke really uses?

But as someone once said, on that first Easter Jesus dropped a bomb in the lap of the women and disciples and everyone else and said, "That day you thought you were going to have? Yeah, it's not happening. That life you thought you were going to live? Yeah, it's not either. Because I have something much bigger, and much better in mind for you.

But friends, in order to get to the much bigger, and much better, we need to be willing to trust God with our lives. And not just one little piece of our lives, all of it . . .the physical, the spiritual, the financial, the material . . .all of it. We need to be willing to trust God.

Some years ago in the poorest neighborhood of NYC, a section of northern Harlem that suffered from double digit unemployment and a per capita income under \$6500, a homegrown clergyman by the name of Preston Washington, decided he'd had enough of trusting the dead to stay dead. So he took it upon himself to form a coalition of religious and civic leaders to lure the neighborhood back to life.

They fought for, cajoled, and seduced every private and public dollar they could get their hands on so that they could at least get a shovel in the ground. Within three years they had a lot of shovels in the ground and, as Washington pointed out, "We were digging foundations, not graves."

They had \$200 million dollars worth of shovels, according to Washington's obituary in the NY Times. They developed 1300 housing units, 30 retail stores, and \$1.7 million dollars in education and housing for people living with HIV and AIDS. Washington became known for pushing churches beyond traditional roles in larger and larger missions.

Washington believed you really could find the living among the dead.

Friends, don't believe for a minute that something like that isn't possible for your life. Easter tells us it is possible; that anything is possible; but we must be willing to let go of the dead things and trust God with our lives.

Easter is the invitation to follow Christ out of the tombs of our fears. It's an invitation to allow the God of life into our lives even if that means God will shake them up. Easter is an invitation to say to that dead god that holds us back, in spite of my fear, I'm going to risk and grow and stretch and care and live, because I believe in something more powerful than you. As Anne Lamott says, "Courage is just fear that has said its prayers."

So I want to close with a story that some of you have heard before, but it's a good worth and worth repeating, especially on Easter. Henri Nouwen shares a story with his readers about The Flying Rodleights, German trapeze artists he greatly admired – so much so that he befriended them, attended practice, even traveled with them. "What's it like?" He asked once and the leader, the flyer said, "I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I'm the star – but the real star is Joe, my catcher. How does that work?" Nouwen asked. "The secret," Rodleigh said, "is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything... You do nothing?" Rodleigh responded, "The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher ... the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that the catcher will be there for him."

Nouwen reflects: “the words of Jesus flashed through my mind. Don’t be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don’t try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and trust, trust, trust.” (p. 66-67)

Friends, Easter is the invitation to trust God, to get our faces out of the dirt, and to stand up tall and claim the life Christ has in store. Which might not be the life you had in mind, but Easter promises it will be big and better than you imagined. In fact it will be so much bigger and better, that it will be downright unbelievable.

Amen.