

Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 28:1-10

Rev. Henry Pascual

PRAYER: God of life, open our minds to your Word and clear our path with your truth. Release us from everything that pulls us away from you, and settle us deeply in Christ's eternal hope. Amen.

Have you ever noticed that the story of Jesus is framed by a message of reassurance, saying, “**Do not be afraid.**” At his birth, the angels declare it to the shepherds in the field, “*Do not be afraid, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ, the Lord*” (Luke 2:10-11). At his resurrection, an angel announces it to the women at the tomb (Matt. 28:5). Later, Jesus repeats it to his disciples (Matt. 28:10).

“Don’t be afraid!” When was the last time someone said something like that to you? As children, we heard it a lot—perhaps from our parents, as they wrapped their arms around us. And we’re immediately comforted.

But as we grow older, **our fears get more complicated**. We realize that death is inevitable, that, eventually, it takes everyone we love. When you’re facing a reality that heavy, a simple “Don’t worry” just isn’t enough.

We’ve all been there. **Often, “don’t be afraid” is actually a reason to worry.** “Your job is safe,” even though you see the office is clearing out. We hear it in the hospital just before surgery: “It’s just a routine procedure.” It’s even in the church: “Don’t worry about the budget deficit; this church has a long record of faithful giving.” So, if I sound too pessimistic about the future of the church, don’t worry—it’s just a sermon.

I remember when I had open-heart surgery a few years ago to replace a valve. The day before the operation, a team of doctors came into my room to go over the plan. The lead doctor was very reassuring. He told me I’d be fine and mentioned that there are about 100,000 of these procedures every year. But then, he was honest enough to admit there was a tiny risk—about 5%—that something could go wrong.

“But don’t worry,” he said.

Then, right on cue, his assistants handed me an “Informed Consent” form. It was a legal and ethical requirement designed to ensure that I was fully aware of what was about to happen before the procedure began. But it’s a funny thing to sign. I wasn’t just giving permission; I was verifying that they had explained the risks, side effects, and complications to me. Honestly, it’s hard not to be afraid when you’re signing a paper that says you know exactly everything that could possibly happen to you.

Now, pastors like me always want to offer the right words of reassurance—especially when we’re sitting with the sick or someone facing death. But if I’m being honest, I don’t really have any words **of my own** to give. Just like those doctors in the hospital, I don’t actually have the authority to say, “Don’t be afraid.” I can’t say that because I can’t guarantee what happens next.

So, if we don’t have the authority to say “don’t be afraid,” who does?

In today’s Gospel, the women are terrified. There’s an earthquake. An angel descends from heaven. The massive stone is rolled back from the tomb. But in the middle of all that chaos, the angel looks at them and says, “Do not be afraid.” He says it with **real authority**.

And you know who else speaks those words with that same power? **Jesus**. Over and over in the Gospels, we hear him say, “Fear not.” He says it to the disciples, as the storm threatens to overwhelm their boat (Matt. 14:27). He says it to a grieving father who just lost his daughter (Luke 8:50). And he says it to us today, reminding us that we are more valuable than sparrows (Matt. 10:31).

But here’s the thing: when Jesus says, “Do not be afraid,” **he isn’t promising that nothing will ever go wrong**. He isn’t saying that everything will just be fine.

Let’s be honest—**often, things do go wrong**. We know that for someone facing late-stage cancer, the body eventually reaches its limit. And we know that the big transitions we go through are naturally full of stress.

In fact, researchers at University Hospitals have identified the top five most stressful events we can face: the death of a loved one, divorce, moving, a major illness, or losing your job.¹

So, if Jesus isn't promising that nothing will ever go wrong, what is he actually saying when he tells us, "Fear not"?

He's giving us a different kind of assurance. It's the promise that **no matter what hits us, God will give us the strength to endure it.** That we are not alone—that ultimately, God's love is stronger than anything we will ever face.

It is not the words that are said that matter. What matters is the source—**who said them.**

The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard had a great way of explaining this. He used the analogy of a theology student versus an Apostle, or even Jesus himself.

Imagine a student standing up and saying, "There is eternal life." Now, imagine Jesus saying those exact same words: "There is eternal life." The words haven't changed, but there is a massive difference.

The student speaks from "reflection." He's read the books, heard the lectures, and followed the logic. He can give you a strong argument, but he can't give you a guarantee. He has plenty of information, but he has zero authority.

Kierkegaard's point was simple: just because someone can repeat Christ's words perfectly doesn't mean they carry Christ's power. **Only the one who holds the truth can speak it with authority.**²

Applying Kierkegaard's idea, we see that when Jesus says, "Do not be afraid," he speaks with an authority no one else has. Why? Because he's the one **who actually conquered death.** He is the only one who can say: "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11:25).

¹ <https://www.uhhospitals.org/blog/articles/2015/07/the-top-5-most-stressful-life-events>

² See the section "The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle," in Soren Kierkegaard's *The Book of Adler*.

For most of us today, the fear of death isn't immediate. We're more concerned with pressing problems like mounting bills, the rising cost of everything, or the health of the people we love. While death remains a "top ten" concern, it's actually secondary to the fear of *how* we're going to live and exactly how much it's going to cost us to stay healthy.

In fact, there's a growing obsession right now with trying to outsmart death through biotechnology and longevity science. Tech journalist Kara Swisher is launching a new CNN Original Series this Saturday, April 11th. The show is called *Kara Swisher Wants to Live Forever*.

Over six episodes, she will dive into the world of Silicon Valley billionaires and scientists who are trying to bypass the natural limits of the human body. Swisher has spoken—sometimes seriously, sometimes with humor—about the idea of living forever in the context of modern technology. And in this series, she's trying to cut through the hype to see what's real science and what's just wishful thinking.³

In the resurrection story, after the angel told the women not to be afraid—because Jesus had truly risen—they ran from the tomb. Filled with this incredible joy, they shared the news with the other disciples.

Then, suddenly, Jesus himself was standing right there in front of them. He greeted them, saying, "Peace be with you!" They came up to him, took hold of his feet, and just worshipped him. And then Jesus said those familiar words of comfort and assurance, "Do not be afraid." (Matt. 28:9-10).

It's amazing how this Easter story works. The people who really let those words of assurance sink into their souls end up full of praise and gratitude.

The 4th century church father, St. John Chrysostom, once gave the following summary of his teachings on the "fear of the Lord." By "fear of the Lord," he did not mean a paralyzing terror of a tyrant but a **profound reverence and awe of God**. And in that sense, I want to share it with you in the form of a blessing:

May you *fear* God so much that you fear nothing else. Happy Easter!
Amen.

³<https://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2026/01/29/cnn-original-series-releases-first-look-and-introduces-kara-swisher-wants-to-live-forever/>