

Get On With It

Acts 1:1-11

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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I guess it's obvious that my vocation involves a lot of speaking and talking and writing every week. I was thinking about this yesterday. I say a lot in a given week. Just this week I preached a funeral sermon, wrote an article for the church newsletter, wrote a session on prayer for a study guide for new Christians, prepared for my Wednesday night prayer meeting talk, put together a series of materials for a couple I am trying to do pre-marital counseling with long-distance, and prepared this sermon.

With that much writing and speaking, it is possible for me to look back on the things I find myself saying and see certain themes that seem to crop up again and again. It struck me this week that over the last few months I have talked and written quite a bit about our need as Christians to stop living in fear.

I think that keeps coming up for me because it seems so obvious to me that we live in such a culture of fear. We are so afraid. We are afraid of terrorism (a fearful word in itself) and crime. Politicians use fear as a political tactic.

As I said in my newsletter article last month, we parents parent in fear. My children are growing up in what I'm calling the

“helmet generation”—meaning there are helmets for everything.

For Christmas, my son Sam got a “rip stick”, which is a type of skateboard, except it has only two wheels instead of four and the two wheels swivel. It's basically designed to make people fall. It came with an instructional DVD. It seemed to me that the children demonstrating the “rip stick” on the DVD had on more body armor than our soldiers in Iraq.

The “helmetization” of childhood is symptomatic of the low-grade fear that seems to pervade every aspect of our lives (My attorney has instructed me to offer this disclaimer: Helmets do save lives; kids, wear your helmets).

Fear is everywhere. It is the understatement of the year to say that the TV news peddles fear. Fear is clearly the driving force in the packaging of TV news. Their task is to make us afraid so we will watch, and it works.

That includes the weather, doesn't it? The fearful hype generated by our weather forecasters is an amazing phenomenon to me. Yes, a few times a year the weather reporters are right and helpful in a real crisis such as with the tornadoes we had a couple of months ago. But most of the time it is ridiculous.

I've been thinking about this pervasive fear a lot during this season of Easter. Remember when Mary Magdalene and the

other Mary went to Jesus' empty tomb. Two men in white robes approached them. And these two men in white robes said, *Don't be afraid. Go and tell the others.*

It seems that the women don't take to heart the part about not being afraid. Matthew says they leave the tomb with *fear* and great joy. Both frightened and joyful, the women run to tell the disciples. They took their fear with them.

Did you notice that in our text today, the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven, the two men in white robes show up again? I wonder if it was the same two men. This time they are speaking to Jesus' fearful disciples, who stand staring, open-mouthed, up into the sky where Jesus has just disappeared.

And the two men in white robes are saying much the same thing they said to the women at the tomb. I think they are saying: *Stop being afraid. Stop staring vacantly up into the sky. This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come again in the same way you saw him go.*

Several weeks before this, once the disciples figured out that Jesus really had risen from the grave, everything was great. What a time they had during those days together after the resurrection. Jesus continued to appear to them for the next forty days. He taught them. It was great.

But then he left. Jesus ascended into heaven.

And there the disciples stood, wide-eyed and open-mouthed with fear. Sure enough this had to be a scary time. The one they loved, their Lord, the Savior left them standing there alone staring into a blank blue sky wondering what in the world they are going to do next with their lives.

I think it is important for us to see that the main interest here in Acts 1 seems to be less what is happening to Jesus going up in the sky and more what is about to happen in the lives of those earliest Christians.

The ascension of Jesus is not simply a tale from the ancient world about how they thought Jesus was transported from earth to heaven. It is a pivotal event in the Christian story. It is the moment when the mission of Jesus is handed over to his followers.

It's the time when two men in white robes said to Jesus' followers,

Quit staring at an empty sky and get on with it.

Quit living in fear.

Jesus rose again.

He told you what to do.

Get on with it.

Don't get busy, necessarily.

But get on with living life in the power of the Spirit.

Quit living in fear as though Jesus hadn't been raised.

The resurrected Christ is supposed to be the death of fear. Now is the time for us to begin to live out from under fear's shadow.

What would it be like, do you suppose, if a person could lose his or her fear of death?

I got a glimpse into an answer to that question by reading a very little known play by Eugene O'Neill entitled "Lazarus Laughed." The great preacher John Claypool directed me to the play. I'm told that the play was not a commercial success. In fact, it closed just a week after it opened on Broadway years ago. In this play, though, I think O'Neill has put his finger on the functional significance of this season of Easter and the ascension of Jesus.

The play begins, or picks up, where the Biblical story of Lazarus leaves off. You may remember that Lazarus was the friend that Jesus called back from the dead. He'd been buried for four whole days when Jesus came to the village of Bethany, had the stone rolled back from the tomb, and gave him back the gift of life.

As the curtain goes up on the play, Lazarus is seen stumbling out of the dark, blinking into the sunlight. And after the grave clothes are taken off of him he begins to laugh a gentle, soft laugh—an embracing, astonishing, welcoming laughter. The very first thing he does is to embrace Jesus with gratitude.

Then he begins to embrace his sisters and the other people who were gathered there.

He has a very clear look in his eye, nothing far away. It's as if he's seeing the world about him for the very first time. He reaches over and pats the earth very affectionately. He looks up at the sky, at the trees, at the neighbors as if he had never seen them before, as if he is overwhelmed by the incredible alrightness of the way everything is.

In the play he makes his way back to his house and the whole village of Bethany is awash with wonder. Finally somebody gets the courage to ask what was on everybody's mind. *Lazarus, tell us what it's like to die. What lies on the other side of this boundary that none of us have crossed?*

At that point, Lazarus begins to laugh even more intensely and then he says, *There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy.* He continues, *Death is not the way it appears from this side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos. It is, rather, a portal through which we move into everlasting growth and everlasting life.*

Then he says, *The One who meets us there is the same generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the One who gave us our birth. Not because we deserved it but because that generous One wanted us to be and therefore there is nothing to fear in the next realm. The grave is as empty as a doorway is*

empty. It is a portal through which we move into greater and finer life.

Therefore, there is nothing to fear. Our great agenda is to learn to accept, to learn to trust. We are put here to learn to love more fully. There is only life. There is no death. And with that his laughter began to fill the whole house in which he was staying.

Well, Lazarus, in the play, goes back to his daily tasks and yet there is something different. He is now a non-anxious person. He is no longer vulnerable to that fear that diminishes the vitality of life. The house where he lives became known as the "House of Laughter," and night after night, you would hear singing and dancing.

And the spirit of this one who had come back with this message that there is nothing to fear began to spread throughout the whole little village. The quality of work began to rise all over Bethany. People began to live more humanely and more generously with each other. There did not seem to be the old occasion for conflicts that there had used to be. In fact, a joy settled over this whole little community because someone had come back saying that there was finally nothing to fear.

However, not everyone in Bethany was pleased with this turn of events. The Roman authorities were quick to sense that this one who had lost his fear of death was, in fact, a threat to the kind of control that they liked to maintain.

The key to intimidation is always fear. The way a tyrant holds someone down is by always suggesting that if they don't obey then something terrible, like death, would be used against them.

One of the cruelest of all the Roman emperors, a man named Caligula, used to say, *Crosses and corpses are so educational. Let the scum see their blood or the blood of some of their kin and it will so cower them in fear that then we can rule them.*

So the Romans were masters at intimidation, and Lazarus represented a real threat. How do you intimidate someone who is no longer afraid of death? In the play, the Roman authorities move in on Lazarus. They tell him to quit laughing. They tell him his house can no longer be the occasion of parties and all he does is to laugh all the more.

The truth is, he says, there is nothing you can do to me. There is no death. There is only life.

The Romans were so frustrated that they arrest him. They take him to Caesarea where he appears before a higher official, but he's not able to do anything with Lazarus. And so, in the play, he is taken all the way to Rome.

The play ends as he stands face to face with the Roman emperor. Here is the man who is allegedly the most powerful of all on earth. He says to Lazarus, *You have a choice. You'll*

either stop this infernal laughter right this minute or I'm going to have you put to death.

And Lazarus continued to laugh. He says to the emperor, *Go ahead and do what you will. There is no death. There is only life.*

The play ends with a man who is no longer afraid of death actually being more powerful than the one who ruled all of the Roman Empire.

Now it seems, as Claypool points out, that Eugene O'Neill has put his finger here on the functional significance of Jesus' resurrection. Because when Jesus came back from the grave he had the same message to give us as Lazarus gave when he came forth from the tomb in the play.

When Jesus emerged from the grave, His first words were, *Don't be afraid.* He, too, would say, *There is only life. There is only laughter. There is only the joy and the mercy of God.*

It is that sense that we no longer have to be afraid of the dark at the end of the tunnel. The fear of death can have such incredible impact not just on life after death, but on life before death and life after birth. I'm not sure that any of us realize the degree to which the fear of death is at the root of so many of the fears that sap the vitality of our lives.

Homer, the ancient poet, put it quite succinctly. He said, "Death is that thing that destroys what we call life and who can remove the terror of it?"

Well, the answer is, "Jesus can." He came back from the grave. And now the grave is empty like a door is empty. It is a way to the next part of God's grand adventure. And the fear of death and loss is replaced by a sense of abundance and adventure and generosity.

[John Claypool, "Easter and the Fear of Death," March 30, 1997, 30 Good Minutes]

And when Jesus ascended into heaven and left it to us here on earth, a new grand adventure began.

That fragile little group of distraught disciples watching their savior leave them received the power of his life-giving, death-defying Spirit and took on the whole world with boldness and fearlessness.

You know that you and I can step outside of fear's shadow. As the two men in white robes said a long time ago, *Why do you stand there staring up into heaven?* We can live a life without fear. And it's time get on with it. It's time to get on with the abundant life, the adventurous life that Jesus has empowered us to live.

That is why that Christ candle that was first lighted on Christmas Eve with the birth of Christ, that same candle that

was carried out of this dark sanctuary on Good Friday, that same candle that was brought back in on Easter Sunday, has remained lit in the sanctuary for all these weeks after Easter Sunday. Because the resurrection was not an isolated one time event. The light of Christ is still shining. And ever since, we live not in the shadow of fear, but in the light of life.