

April 16, 2017 (Journey worship)

TEXT: Matthew 28:1–10

TITLE: The New Normal

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Everything about the life of Jesus was disruptive and caused disruptions - his unexpected and miraculous conception to a young woman betrothed to another; his birth in a lowly stable, the star that directed the Magi and shepherds to his location; his first years spent in exile with his family, finally settling in Nazareth, a place where no good thing ever came out of. It's no wonder the Israelites didn't recognize him as their Messiah, the one who would come to set them free from the Roman empire and to restore them to right relationship with God.

Jesus disrupted the lives of the twelve: calling them into discipleship, away from life as they had always known and experienced it; calling them to drop their professions and life's work, to leave behind families, friends and everything they knew it up to the point of their encounter with him and to live a life that would ultimately take them to the foremost corners of the earth and cause them to be disrupters, troublemakers, disturbers of norms and even lead them to untimely and unimaginable deaths.

Jesus lived his life in a disruptive way—upsetting the conventions of the religious adherents that placed more importance on process, procedure and formality than living righteously, justly, joyfully; upsetting the societal norms of gender, class, culture, and religious ideologies. Jesus disruptively hung out with untouchables, the unclean, cultural outsiders, foreigners, sinners, women and Gentiles. Jesus disrupted the status quo: turning over tables, upending conventions, rearranging practices and changing hearts and minds. And what did all this disruption get him? A death sentence, placed on a cross, one of the most despised and despicable ways to be put to death in his culture.

And even in death, Jesus Christ continued to upend and disturb the status quo. Upon him giving up his spirit to death on the cross, the day grew dark as night, the temple curtain ripped in two, the earth shook, rocks were split, tombs were opened and many of

the bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; a disruption of unimaginable proportion, something that had never been witnessed before, nor has been witnessed since by humanity.

We have all experienced disruptions and disturbances in our lives; the death of a loved one, sickness or disease, financial struggles, both positive and negative life changes, the addition of a child or family member to the household, aging, the list is inexhaustible; because in reality, even positive change can be disruptive.

Gay Becker, in his book entitled: "Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World" writes:

"...people consciously wrestle with some cultural ethos that is at odds with their life situation....Narratives of disruption are people's effort to integrate disruption and its aftermath with prevailing cultural sentiments. People define normalcy in terms of particular cultural images that have salience for them....people (themselves) generate categories of normalcy, although they may later take issue with those categories when they no longer fit with life experience....When we talk about disruption to life, we are also talking about stability, which is the flipside of disruption."

As Mary Magdalene and the other Mary approached the tomb where Jesus' body lay the morning of the third day following his crucifixion and burial, they were seeking normalcy in what had been an abnormal and disruptive week. Their lives as they knew them: befriending, following, and supporting Jesus had come to a tragic end. Jesus shared with his followers that after Passover, the Son of Man would be handed over to be crucified, but nothing could have prepared the "Marys" for what they found when they approached the tomb in which Jesus' body was buried.

The Gospel writer, Matthew tells us: "suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightening and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.'"

As the two women approach, what had up to this time been a sealed tomb, all heaven appears to have broken loose, as an angel of the Lord suddenly appears on the scene, rolling away the stone that seemed to separate Jesus from the disruptive life he lived and sitting on the stone, the angel demonstrated divine triumph. In that moment, God irrupted into the world in a new and decisive way. New and decisive, because rather than Jesus' male disciples going early in the morning to Jesus' tomb and receiving the visitation from God's divine messenger, women received the news that Jesus had risen from the dead. New and decisive as the angel appeared like lightening in clothing white as snow. New and decisive as fear was struck in the hearts of the men guarding the

tomb and they became as dead. New and decisive as the angel addressed the women—"Do not be afraid!"

Do not be afraid – words spoken often in life and in the Bible when faced with change, discord, disorder or disruption. "Do not be afraid," Moses told the Israelites as he led them to freedom. "Do not be afraid" – the angel of God said to Mary, the mother of Jesus, when delivering the message that she would bear the savior of the world. "Do not be afraid"—the first words uttered to the shepherds in the field when the angel brought them the news of great joy for all the people that the Messiah had been born in the City of David. "Do not be afraid" was reiterated by Jesus as the two "Marys" all but ran into him as they hurried to share the good news of Jesus' resurrection to the disciples.

John Calvin states:

"It is proper that the majesty of God should strike both terror and fear indiscriminately into the godly, as well as the reprobate, that all flesh may be silent before God's (his) face. But when the Lord has humbled and subdued the elect, God (he) immediately mitigates their dread that they may not sink under its oppressive influence."

Brothers and sisters the resurrection of Jesus is not about us. Jesus' resurrection is about God taking on our battles with sin and death, doing for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. The resurrection is about Jesus, though he knew no sin, becoming sin (2 Cor. 2:5) and who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness; humbling himself and becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus' resurrection on that third day is not about our doubts or fears, but it's about encountering the Lord's love for us in new, unexpected and disruptive ways.

William Willimon states: "No exclusively human, anthropological help is sufficient for us and our deepest need. Therefore the most interesting character in this drama is God who raises the dead and makes a way when we thought there was no way. This is the new 'normal.'"

Jesus instructs the women to go and tell the brothers to meet him in Galilee – Jesus is going back to the place where he healed the sick, set captives free, restored sight to the blind, released demons, reconciled relationship, mediated differences and shared the good news. And the disciples are to meet him there to continue the work of Jesus, what's old is the new again. The same is true for us. The new normal is to continue to disrupt and disturb the status quo; continue to do the impossible with God's help; continue to share the good news that he who has died has risen from the dead. Continue show up, act out, speak truth to power and assurance to those who have lost their hope; continue to march, picket and pray; continue to be the people of God by radically loving one another, as God loves us!

It seems that our lives, this country, this world are in total disarray. A news pundit said: "this is our new normal." Well, brothers and sisters, the new normal in a disruptive world is to expect God to disruptively resurrect everything that we may think is dead. For just as God is able to raise Jesus from the dead, God can right the wrongs of prejudice, hate, injustice, violence, wars, despair, broken dreams, broken lives, broken people. God is still with us, disrupting and resurrecting. Do not be afraid for Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Amen.