

Kirby Lawrence Hill  
April 20, 2014  
Colossians 3:1-4  
Matthew 28:1-10

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Easter  
DO NOT...

They had been there late Friday afternoon. According to Matthew's account, Mary Magdalene and a woman called 'the other Mary' had observed Joseph of Arimathea wrapping Jesus' dead body and placing it in a rock-hewn tomb. They had then seen the great stone rolled to cover the entrance to the tomb. So the first 'do not' is for us who are hearing the story: do not be misled by speculation that there was confusion about where Jesus' body was entombed. These eyewitnesses knew which tomb had been used. Unbeknownst to the two women, on Saturday morning, some of the religious leaders who had plotted Jesus' death asked that soldiers be allotted to guard the tomb because they had heard that Jesus had said that he would rise again. They figured that some of his followers might come and try to steal the body. So soldiers were put in place and the great stone was sealed in its place to make everything secure, or so they thought. Even if it would include the graveyard shift, what could be easier military duty than making sure a corpse stayed where it belonged? Matthew has a second 'do not' for us - do not think that Jesus' body could have been stolen by his followers.

Early on Sunday morning, at the break of dawn, the two Marys went back to the tomb. Not only were they grieving the horrible death of their friend, Jesus. They were also grieving a world where the flame of hope can be so quickly extinguished, where the powerful are so willing to use ruthlessness to stay on top, where innocence and peace can be torn to pieces. Their deep pain must have been telling them loudly and clearly certain 'do not's': "Do not love again; do not hope again; do not believe again because it hurts too much to have loved and hoped and believed and lost." Just before they reached the tomb, the scene including the soldiers and the great stone covering the tomb would have conveyed other 'do not's': "Do not trespass. Do not even think about challenging our death-dealing power. Do not hold onto any wishful thinking that your little movement is anything other than dead and gone."

But then, like a timpani roll about to announce a symphonic blast, there was an earthquake. A seismic shift was taking place. Then came an angel, whose appearance was like lightning - perhaps that describes both the glow and the power of the heavenly being. The messenger from God rolled back the great stone that had sealed the tomb, and I can imagine then wiped off angelic hands. The heavy stone had seemed to be so ominous, but as the angel rolled it back and took a seat upon it, it was transformed into something as innocuous as a park bench. After the ground had shaken, we're told the soldiers themselves quaked in their boots upon seeing the angel and then they fainted in fear. The gospel writer couldn't help but grin when adding a little detail about the military detail - that they "became like dead men."

Roman soldiers laying on the ground, the large stone now resting away from the entrance of the tomb, an angelic being sitting on top of it - this wasn't at all what the women had expected to see at the site of the tomb. So the angel delivers another 'do not' to them: "Do not be afraid." The angel had not said, "Do not be afraid," to the soldiers. Perhaps God's life-giving power challenged their priorities in such a way that it made fear an appropriate

response for them. But not for the women – resurrection news would be unsettling, but it would be the best news they had ever heard.

Now using the great stone like a pulpit, the angel proclaims that Jesus had been raised from the dead. The women are invited to look inside the tomb to see for themselves that the body was no longer there. The angel had this resurrection message that was now handed on to the women for them to share. Do not keep this news to yourself. They were to go quickly to tell Jesus' other disciples: "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." As the first humans entrusted with resurrection news, they ran to carry out their task. We are told that the angel's first command, to not be afraid, was not fully followed, because the women went with fear and great joy. Were they afraid they wouldn't be believed? Probably. And with good reason. Were they afraid that such momentous news had been entrusted to them? Probably. Was there some anxiety and confusion about what this could mean? Absolutely. And yet they didn't allow their fear to keep them from running to carry out their mission.

Yet before they could deliver the message they had been given, they were met by the One whom their message was about. They fell at the feet of their risen Lord and held onto him for dear life. But Jesus echoed the 'do not' that the angel had commanded, "Do not be afraid." Then he reminded them of their mission – to go tell his disciples to head to Galilee, where they would see him. Actually, instead of the word 'disciples,' Jesus referred to the very ones who had denied, deserted and abandoned him as 'his brothers.' So often he had taught about forgiveness and reconciliation – clearly in his death and resurrection, he also embodied it! That word, 'brothers,' was indication that even though the disciples' fear had led them to run away when the going got tough, their cowardice would not have the last word about them. Do not ever think that I have given up on you, Jesus was letting it be known. He called them 'brothers,' and he invited them to meet him in Galilee, where his ministry had begun, and where they were still invited to become partners with him in it. At certain points in our lives, we will encounter some painful experiences, perhaps some personal losses, that may well plant within us an internal message of do not – do not dare to love, to hope, or to believe anymore. There may be challenges from beyond us threatening us with an external do not – do not challenge our oppressive power and the status quo for it is too strong. But this day, this resurrection day indicates that the powers that kill are no longer the greatest power. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to realize that in addition to whatever internal and external do nots we perceive, there is an eternal do not – do not be afraid. Do not be afraid that the last word about this world is held by those who hold onto the remnant of a might-makes-right existence. Even when innocence and peace get torn to pieces, with God's life-giving power, they can rise again. Sisters and brothers, do not be afraid that God has given up on us or this world. Even with our past failures, the risen Lord meets us in the place of ministry. Therefore, do not be afraid to love, to hope, to believe. And do not be afraid to boldly proclaim resurrection news. At the same time we can tell fear to get its death grip off our hearts. The life God gives is the lasting word. Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.