

HOW DO YOU TAKE IT?

When I was a teenager, my parents owned a house on the Tennessee River. It was not far from the Brown's Ferry Nuclear Plant; in fact, you could see the plant from our dock. Our dock included a boat house where we stored the boat. The boat was kept in a hoist, which you have to do in the Tennessee river because the level of the river is controlled. They raise and lower it, so if you try to keep it at the same level it will fall. The first thing we did when we used the boat was to lower the boat; the last thing we did was to winch it up.

One day I was in the boat house after having been out on the water, and I was raising the boat in the hoist the same way I had done one hundred times before. As I stood there watching, the rear hoist chain suddenly snapped, and the rear of the boat dropped about four feet, splashing into the water at the end.

I stood in shock for an unknown number of seconds, and then I said some words that I won't repeat here. Then I began to tremble. My mind started racing: what if I had been in the boat? What if the cable had hit me when it snapped? What if the boat was damaged? What if it sank? Most importantly, how the heck am I going to explain this to Dad?

Of course, Dad's initial reaction was to blame me, but he later apologized for it. After looking at the damage he realized that it was nothing that I had done. The chain had worn down and one of the links had separated. Nothing I could have done could have accounted for that.

When we face something that startles us, our behavior changes. We experience what biologists have dubbed the fight or flight syndrome. Our adrenaline flows, our heart rate and respiration rates speed up, and we become "jumpy". We're ready to address danger.

The passage today tells, perhaps, the most important story of the gospel. There may be people will disagree with that, and that's okay with me. I understand the desire to focus on the death of Jesus. Yes, I believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. But if you set aside the theological implications, just for a moment (we'll come back to them, I promise), you realize there isn't really anything that remarkable about the manner of Jesus' death. Jesus wasn't the first person in history to falsely accused of a crime. He wasn't the first person to suffer capital punishment after conviction. Nor was he the first person to be crucified; that happened to many people in antiquity.

Now, as promised, you know and I know that Jesus' death *is* remarkable because he died for our sins, but how did early Christians know that? How did believers know there was something special about his death of Jesus Christ. They couldn't read about it in the bible because the New Testament hadn't even been written yet? None of those books had been written, so how did the first Christians and the apostles know that it was something special?

We begin to find the answer to that question in this story. With two women: Mary Magdalene and, you know, the other Mary, whoever she was. We're told that there was a severe earthquake and that an angel of the Lord had descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightening and the garment as white as snow, and the guards shook for fear of him. The angel addressed them and said, "Do not be afraid, for I know you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as he said. Come, see the place where he was lying. Go quickly and tell the disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see him. "

So, the scripture says they departed with fear and great joy and ran to report it to his disciples. Then the scripture says that Jesus met them and greeted them, and they took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid, go and take word to my brethren, to leave for Galilee and they shall see me.

We have a description here of how the resurrection of Jesus was discovered. The description tells us how first the women then the disciples reacted. The women reacted with fear, then they left with fear and great joy. Jesus appeared to the disciples and they worshipped him. Jesus told them not to be afraid. We can see in this story the way the women and the disciples took the news that Jesus was alive, that he had been raised from the dead. So, here is my question for you. Hearing the story, knowing that Jesus is risen, knowing that Jesus is alive, how do you take it? How do you take it?

For two thousand years the church has been making the claim that Jesus is alive. Jesus was dead, but then he rose from the dead. The stone was rolled away, and an angel of the Lord appeared in his place. The disciples were instructed to go on to Galilee and wait for Jesus there. We know how they took it. How do you take it? How do you receive the news that Jesus is alive.

Do you greet the risen Lord with fear? I suppose that would be the natural reaction. When were confronted with events that we can't explain it is only natural to be afraid. I can promise you I was plenty afraid when that boat fell. But here's the thing about fear. It can have all kinds of effects on us. Fear can motivate us to behave properly. It can motivate us to avoid dangerous situations. It can motivate us to be careful. It can also paralyze us. It can cause us to flee when perhaps we should stand our ground.

Fear of the Lord is good thing, when it motivates us to obedience. It's a bad thing when it motivates us to evade God, to avoid God because we're afraid.

Joy is also a double-edged sword. It's a good thing when we experience joy in the Lord and are led to follow the Lord. It's a bad thing when we allow our joy to inhibit our service to the kingdom. It's a bad thing when we worship Jesus but don't follow Jesus.

There are two things in this passage that I just read that strike me, beyond the obvious striking thing that is the resurrection of Jesus. As awesome as it is to think about the death and resurrection of Jesus, the passage makes clear that this something to celebrate, not to fear. The instruction “Do not be afraid, “ is issued twice in this passage: first, by the angel to the women, then by Jesus to the disciples. I know of no greater demonstration of the power of God than to bring someone back from the dead, yet we are told that this should not be a cause for fear. We shouldn’t be afraid.

Indeed, it isn’t. It should be a cause for great joy. This event provides us with tangible proof for our claim that Jesus can provide eternal life. If he was resurrected and he says we can be, then why not believe? The resurrection portends the coming Kingdom of God. After this event nothing was ever the same again. No longer do we live world devoid of hope. We live in a world where life is possible even after death. That’s a cause for great joy. Because of that we should never fear again.

The second thing that strikes me is that this isn’t the end. Death is usually thought of as an ending. It’s the place where everything stops. It’s the end the of the road, the final destination. But not in this story.

When the disciples learn that Jesus has risen, they begin with worship. I suppose that’s only natural. But this is only the beginning. The death of Jesus is the beginning of a journey. They are not supposed to just stay there and worship Jesus. In the story Jesus instructs the disciples to go to Galilee and meet him there. In a broader sense, the death of Jesus is the beginning of a journey for all of us. It’s where our story of salvation begins. It’s the place where we begin our journey towards becoming disciples ourselves. It’s the beginning of a new life; a life dedicated to the Kingdom of God. Each of us is being called to a life beyond worship; we are called to go out into the world to meet Jesus there.

Three people within this congregation have chosen to make their professions of faith this morning. They have announced to the world that they are prepared to depart on their journey of faith. Each of you has made a similar promise. Each of you has promised to help guide and nurture them on that journey. I receive that news with great joy, for it is in itself a story of resurrection.

I don’t know how you take the story of the resurrection. Some of you may approach it with fear, still others as a joy, still others as simply another opportunity to worship. Each of those is an understandable reaction. But I know how I take. I take it as a call to action, serving the risen Lord who redeems and saves us all. He’s calling us to meet him out in the world. So, the only question left is, how do you take it?

