

Snakes, bugs and spiders. Many people have intense fears of these creatures. I myself am deathly afraid of snakes, so whenever I am out hiking in the woods, I am always on my guard hoping and praying I don't see one slither out of the bushes onto whatever path I'm following. Which makes me wonder, if perhaps Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were at all worried or anxious about seeing snakes, bugs, and spiders when they went to the tomb of Jesus on that first easter Sunday.

Now, even if you're unfazed by slithering reptiles, creeping insect, and crawling arachnids, there's still plenty to be afraid of in this world. For example: Some individuals have a fear of the Dark. And although it is most common among children, it is a fear that can follow some people into adulthood. In fact, the phobia itself is not really about darkness, but about what dangers might be lurking in the shadows. Maybe that is why the two women waited until daybreak to make their trip to Jesus' grave to pay their respects on that first day of the week.

Then there is the fear of closed spaces. That's another common fear, also known as claustrophobia. People with this fear find it unbearable to be inside small spaces such as elevators, closets, and caves. Perhaps the two women were feeling a bit anxious about entering the tomb of Jesus, which had been carved out of rock.

And while very few people have a desire to die, there are some individuals who have a crippling, paralyzing fear of death. It is so overwhelming for them, in fact, that they won't ever leave their home, for fear of a deadly attack or accident. Most likely neither of the two Marys were petrified of death, since they were bravely heading to a grave that was being guarded by soldiers. But, I think it is safe to assume that on that first Easter morning, fear was a dominant emotion. Especially given the fact that the possibility of snakes, bugs, spiders, darkness, closed spaces, and death are all top-10 fears, according to the mental health

website *Youper*. And yet, none of those things kept the women from their desire to visit the tomb of their teacher and friend.

On this blissful day we sing about the joy of Easter, but first we need to name the fear. So, for just a little while I invite you to put yourself in the sandals of the two women as they came to the tomb of Jesus. And it first it may not seem all that scary until we remember that as soon as they arrived, there “was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.”

Did you know that some people have a fear of earthquakes, called *seismophobia*. It is part of the family of fears called *catastrophobia*, fear of disasters. No one would blame the two women if they were frightened by the violent earthquake they experienced. And, seeing a divine messenger from God must have been quite frightening considering his appearance “was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.” Don’t forget that the soldiers who had been posted to guard the tomb “were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men,” so we can’t really blame them if they began to feel overwhelmed with fear. But at least the angel opened the tomb, which meant no more fear of the dark, or fear of closed spaces.

Notice that the first words from the angel to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are, “Do not be afraid.” It’s almost as if he knew what they were feeling, and he wanted to comfort and encourage them. Psychologist and pastor Bill Gaultiere says that “Fear not!” is “the most repeated command in the Bible. In fact, it has been said that there are 365 ‘Fear nots’ in the Bible — one ‘Fear not’ for every day of the year!” And the command can be given in a variety of forms, such as “Do not be afraid” or “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” but the message is always the

same: Know that God is with you, giving you peace in the middle of stress, danger or uncertainty.

“Fear not” is a very common command. But it is more easily said than done. In fact, it is probably the toughest of God’s commandments to keep. Of course, some people might dispute that idea. They’ll say that the Ten Commandments are the hardest: “Remember the sabbath day ... Honor you father and your mother ... You shall not murder ... You shall not commit adultery ... You shall not steal.”

Others might say that Jesus gave the most difficult commands in his Great Commandment: “Love the Lord your God ... Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” After all there is no question that this kind of love is an enormous challenge. Especially considering the fact that the love Jesus was talking about was unconditional, sacrificial, and inclusive. Pastor Amy Butler writes that “Love your enemies” is “the hardest commandment. There’s nothing neat, clean or easy about it at all. We know we will fail — not a question. And maybe that’s why it’s so hard for us to even try.”

The Ten Commandments. The Great Commandment of Jesus. The challenge to love your enemies. All are very difficult commandments to keep. But none are quite as tough as “Fear not!” And that is most likely because lots of things scare us. We have trouble with “Fear Not” because we are afraid of so much. We fear the deaths of our loved ones, serious illnesses, not having enough money for retirement, business failures, climate change, mass shootings, terrorism and criminal activity. We see so many threats to our well-being that we can hardly believe it when we hear the words, “Fear not!”

But the words that the angel spoke to the women on Easter morning are also meant for us as well. “Do not be afraid,” he said. “I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.” In other words, the very worst thing that could possibly happen — the death of God’s Son

on a cross — has now been overcome by the resurrection. Darkness has been replaced by light, and death has been replaced by new life.

“Go quickly and tell his disciples,” the divine messenger of God continues, “He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.” And the promise of the angel for us is that Jesus is going ahead of us, always ahead of us. We do not need to fear the future, because Jesus is in it. He is calling us forward and promising to meet us in what lies ahead.

I’m sure we can all agree that most of our fears are grounded in uncertainty about the future. We don’t want to get on an airplane because we are afraid it will crash. We put off having children because we are worried about the dangers they will face. We are nervous about retirement because we fear that we have not saved up enough money. So when we are stressed by uncertainty, we cannot keep the commandment “Fear Not!” But in faith, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, when we realize that the risen Jesus is in our future, thankfully we can lay our fears aside.

On Easter morning, the two women “hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy.” Yes, they still felt some fear, but it was beginning to be mixed with an incessant joy especially given the fact that as they traveled on the road, Jesus met them and greeted them, and in their elation they fell down and worshiped him. And what did Jesus say to them? You probably won’t be surprised. He said, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Like the Angel, Jesus repeats the toughest commandment, “Do not be afraid.” But at that point, the women are able to keep the commandment, because the risen Jesus is with them. He is living out the promise of the name that was given to him before he was born: Immanuel, which means “God with us”. Truly, Jesus is the clearest possible sign that God is with us, in the face of every threat to our well-being.

Easter gives us the power to live without fear, trusting Jesus to lead us into the future with confidence. Although we will still face situations that make us anxious and afraid, we do not need to be overwhelmed. We can give our fears to the Lord, who conquered death and is waiting for us in the future.

Since that very first Easter, followers of Jesus have found this to be true. The apostle Paul was facing a number of terrifying threats to his well-being: Imprisonments, floggings, shipwrecks, and danger from bandits and other opponents. And yet, because he believed that Christ was raised from the dead, he could say, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Nothing in all creation, said Paul, “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Over a thousand years later, an English mystic named Julian of Norwich said, “*all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well.*” This was not just wishful thinking for Julian, because she had life-long struggles, during a time when there was a devastating pandemic and a political revolution. But she was able to say “all will be well” because she discovered that love is God’s meaning. “Remain in this,” she wrote, “and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end. So I was taught that love is our Lord’s meaning.”

Yes, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. All will be well, and every kind of thing will be well. We can keep the commandment “Fear not!” because we have a risen Lord who has overcome anything that can hurt or destroy us. And because Jesus has been raised, and the tomb is empty, we do not have to be afraid. Thanks be to God. Amen.