

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**April 21, 2019**  
**Easter Sunday**  
**"God So Loved"**  
**1<sup>st</sup> in the *Resurrecting Spirituality* series**  
**Matthew 28:1-10**

For God so **loved** the world...

Maybe you grew up memorizing that one. For a lot of us, John 3:16 was as familiar as the drive to church: Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night... So familiar that we didn't have to think about it.

But today, I want you to hear it again...

For God so loved the world... that God gave his one and only son,

That's what God's love for the world is like...

It's not static love.

It's not a distant love.

And it's not domineering.

It's a love with the energy of desire... and self-giving: For God so loved the world.

Which is to say, then, that there is a longing in the very heart of God reaching out to the world... and... reaching out to you.

In all the particularities of your life.

In the pressures you face at work, and at school, and at home.

In the hobbies and pastimes you enjoy and take delight in.

In your hopes for the future

and in the regrets from your past.

In the questions you keep asking about the present...

There is a longing in the heart of God  
reaching into all of it with you.

**It is the same longing that a parent has for her child... to know how beloved he is, and to know that he's not alone in any of it,**

**so that her child can learn to live in the strength of being loved.**

**The longing of God's heart is like the longing of a committed lover,**

**reaching out to embrace his beloved, so that in each other's arms they find a mystical oneness and energy between them... There's a wholeness together that they do not have apart.**

For God **so** loved the world...that God **gave** his one and only son.

And in that giving... we discover that the longing-love of God isn't selfish or self-oriented. It isn't about some arrogant need on God's part to be recognized or to be flattered with our words or with our servitude.

It is a self-giving, sacrificial kind of love.

It's a love that is reaching out to you and to the whole world.

It's the kind of love that is willing to go to hell and back again to win your heart.

And that is what this Easter story we are celebrating this weekend is all about.

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On Friday, Jesus was stripped naked and bare before the world.

And he was crucified with all the pain, and fear, and domination that hell could muster. And the hurt of it ran deep into bone and flesh and sinew.

Imagine God came running after us with all the love of the cosmos, and in the process ran headlong into the power of sin at work in our world, and of sin at work in us and through us...

God ran headlong into the power of envy and pride... in the religious leaders, then and now.

God ran right into the power of violence and domination... into the Roman soldiers and into all who use violence to maintain control and security, then and now.

And God ran right into the power of fear and abandonment by his disciples... those disciples who left Jesus when it was no longer safe, or expedient... then and now.

In God's deep love for us, God ran headlong right into all the powers of sin at work in us.

And in the process, hell came after God with everything it had... and Jesus knew it was coming. He didn't want it to happen, but he knew it was on its way. **"Father take this cup from me, if at all possible, take this cup from me."** he prayed in the garden.

"But not my will, your will be done."

And with those words, he took into his very body all the suffering of the world. He allowed it all... trusting... trusting beyond the facts in front of him,

and trusting beyond the pain that was coming at him...

trusting... that God's love, is a redeeming love,

a love that will make things right and whole again,

and trusting that God's love would always have the last word.

"Not my will, but yours be done," Jesus prayed.

And then, by Friday night, Jesus was dead.

And it sure looked to the whole world like the powers of hell had won,  
and Jesus' way was naïve.

The systems and powers of domination and control, the powers of Roman military violence and power of religious fear mongering,

the power that our own disillusionments have over us,

all the powers and the fears that drive us... all of it, nailed Jesus to a cross. It crucified God in the flesh.

"For God so loved the world, that God gave, God's own self" ... So that we might see just how dominant these things are in our lives and how corrupt they are.

And Saturday, the shock and numbness of it all was starting to sink in with Jesus' followers.

The death of Jesus... just sat there, sinking in all day Saturday... like the most confusing, disorienting thing in the world.

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So, then on Sunday morning, two Marys decide it's time to do what needs to be done, to lay Jesus' body to rest.

They go to the tomb to wrap and finish burying Jesus' dead body.

But as they approach the tomb, the earth beneath their feet begins to shake. They don't understand it, but Resurrection is starting. And the way the Gospel of Matthew tells it, creation itself starts splitting open.

It's like the life of God is piercing back  
into every rock and tree,  
every atom and molecule...

As the life of God is piercing into all of creation, creation is vibrating. It shakes. It's like an earthquake. Because the life and energies of God are shooting back into it.

A 9<sup>th</sup> century Celtic theologian, Erigena says that now every stone and every piece of wood is light. It's all full and pulsing with the energy and life of God. We just have to learn to see it.

Matthew describes it as the earth shaking because in the resurrection, God's life is being injected into the emptiness of creation.

And the tomb opens.  
And there is an angel of God.

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And then, Matthew says the most interesting thing:  
"For **fear** of him, the guards shook and became like **dead** men. But the angel said to the women, '**Do not** be afraid.'"

And it strikes me that these responses to the presence of God and the life of God are purposefully juxtaposed with each other. Fear and no fear. One leads to a kind of death, the other to an encounter with the resurrected Christ.

"For **fear** of him, the guards shook and became like **dead** men." That's where fear takes us. Fear drives a wedge between us and God, just like it had done with Jesus' male disciples. It makes us like dead men.

Fear is one of the most powerful automatic responses we have. Even if you know it's not rational, fear can grip your chest and paralyze you so that you look just as dead as the soldiers at Jesus' tomb.

In case you've forgotten what fear is like, try taking a splinter from a 6-year-old boy's hand. You can tell him all you want that it won't hurt. You can explain that it will only get worse if you leave it in there. You can tell him again and again that you'll be careful.

But as long as fear is in the driver's seat, nothing else can get through,

and that hand is going to stay clenched up tight and not let you in.

That's how fear works. It keeps everyone out.

I love Barbra Brown Taylor's description.

*"Fear is a small cell with no air in it and no light," she writes. "It is suffocating inside, and dark. There is no room to turn around inside it. You can only face in one direction, but it hardly matters since you cannot see anyhow. There is no future in the dark. Everything is over. Everything is past. When you are locked up like that, tomorrow is as far away as the moon.*

*"People can stop by and tap on your walls. They can even bang on the door to show you where it is, but when you are afraid you cannot open up. They might not be who they say they are. They might just make things worse. It is safer to stay where you are, where you know what is what, even if you cannot breathe, even if you cannot move. That is how fear feels."<sup>1</sup>*

It's the crying, clenched fist of a six-year-old boy... pulling away from his daddy that loves him and wants to help him. Fear keeps all the love of the cosmos out.

If you've ever had fear grip you, then you know what Matthew means when he says the guards were afraid and became like dead men.

"And so, the angel said to the women, '**Do not be afraid.**'" Because God's love is reaching out, not to destroy you, but to embrace and redeem you. "**Do not be afraid.**"

It's the same words already spoken over and over again throughout the biblical story when God's life breaks through into people's lives.

"Do not be afraid," a voice says to Abraham on a starry night,  
and then again later to Hagar, when she and her son have been left for dead in the wilderness,  
"Do not be afraid..." the voice of love calls out to her,  
and to the Hebrew people Moses led through the wilderness  
and over and over again to the prophets... we hear it.

And on into the New Testament... when an angel appears to a young Mary and says it again, "Do not be afraid, Mary"

But, of course, she is afraid. The news is overwhelming. But she lets go of the fear. She opens up her fists and trusts anyway. "Let it be unto me," she says... accepting the life of God that is coming into her very body.

And she has a little boy named Jesus, who grows up  
telling his disciples and the crowds again and again, "Do not be afraid..." "Oh you of little faith, why were you afraid? Do not be afraid!"

And now, when that whole story seems to come to an abrupt and brutal ending,  
and everything that Mary and the rest of Jesus' followers believed about God seems like a fairy tale,  
and Jesus and his message have been put to death,  
and the earth is quaking and breaking open,  
and nothing makes any sense...

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<sup>1</sup> Barbra Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 99.

But something is happening...

Now, on Easter morning,

those who fear become like dead men... because they are clenched up, closed off to the resurrection life of God.

But the angel tells the women encountering it all, "Do not be afraid. I know you are looking for a dead man. I know you came here expecting death. But that's not what you're going to find today. Because God's yearning-desiring-love for the world will always have the last word. The energies of God are flowing back into creation!

Jesus is risen!"

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Before anything else, the two Marys are told "**Do not be afraid...**"

And not just once at the empty tomb, but again as they leave.

You see, a few moments later, they leave to find the other disciples and Matthew says they still have some mixture of fear and joy.

That's often how we leave Easter Sunday, I think. Some joy, mixed in still with all the fear and questions still haunting our life. Some hope in God, and still some uncertainty about God as we go to work on Monday and Tuesday...

The women leave the tomb with both fear and joy mixed together, so that as soon as they bump into the resurrected Christ, he begins the exact same way.

**"Greetings! Do not be afraid!"**

This is how the Easter news wants to work its way into our lives... Not with fear of eternal punishment if you don't believe it and not with wrathful language about God who demands perfection and demands blood.

Nope. It begins by just the opposite. "Don't be afraid..."

Because you see... "God **so** loved the world".... that God went to hell and back to help you to believe it... and to know that God longs to enter the mess of our lives.

And God did that because if you believe God's deep love for you, fear loses its grip on you. And if you can believe God so loved the world... if you trust it, then you don't have to live locked up in the dark room of shame, and fear, and self-protection anymore. Instead, you can step out into the light where there is eternal life waiting for you. Or as John 3:16 states, "**so that everyone who believes might not perish, [locked up in that darkness] but have eternal life.**"

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This is what Easter is all about.

It's where new life for us always begins: Trusting God's love for us enough to bring all the energies of our lives, all the uncertain restlessness and questions and yearning of our lives... all the desires and hopes of our lives... Trusting God's powerful love enough to open up all the energies of our body, heart, and mind.

God wants to meet you in that place of your deepest desires and longings of your life. But we have the hardest time allowing it unless we learn to trust the words spoken on resurrection morning.

"Do not be afraid," the angel is saying to you today.

"Do not be afraid," the resurrected Christ is saying to you...

Don't hold yourself back, not even your deepest shame, and disappointments...

not even your deepest doubts and your deepest questions.

"Do not be afraid to bring them into my love. Because my love is one place they will find life and redemption."

That's where transformation happens for us. That's when resurrection starts to happen.

So, for the rest of Eastertide, for the next month and a half, I'm going to be exploring what that looks like more and more in this series called, "Resurrecting Spirituality." I'm going to go to a level deeper than I have before in this conversation around spiritual formation and how to do it.

**Because I believe there is a longing in the heart of God for each of us,  
to live into the resurrection Life of Christ.**

And I also think that many of us have a hard time believing God's love for us deep in our bones, to begin with. So today, I want to say just a few concrete things to each of you.

So, children, I want you to listen to me closely for a moment.

I know that you love God...

But I also know that at the same time something in you has the hardest time believing in God because you can't see God like you can see the rest of us.

But please hear this: even though you cannot see God, God sees you, with all the love and hope for you that you can possibly imagine. Like the most loving grandma you can imagine: God sees you. And God knows you. And God loves you so much that God wants to do great things in your life.

And teenagers in here, I know that some of you want to follow Jesus faithfully. And I know that it is hard with all the pressures you face at school. And it is hard... with all the restless desire in your bodies that you do not know what to do with.

And I know that some of you have given up on this whole God business altogether...

because it just doesn't connect with you anymore,

or you're just not sure how to believe it any more.

So, teenagers, hear me this Easter, even if you have given up on God,

God has not and will not give up on you.

God's yearning love will keep haunting you the rest of your life,  
drawing you back to God's heart.

And adults, I know that so many of you have done that as best as you know how along the way. You love God and you've tried to trust Jesus with your life...

but the pressures and demands of your life, of work and family, somehow seem so removed from all that.

In fact, the honest truth is, it's hard to think of God much... outside of church.

But hear me on this Easter morning. **God is always thinking about you, reaching out to you, longing for you to learn to live completely present and aware of God's love and life within you and around you... just as Jesus did.**

[And the work of spiritual formation, is how that grows to become true in us.]

**And so, to all of you, children and teenagers and adults, I want to say this Easter morning, the love of God is yearning for you...**

**whether you believe it or not,**

**whether you can see it or not,**

**whether you give it a second notice once you walk out these doors**

**or not.**

The life and energies of God are all around you and within you. And the love of God is reaching out to you, not just this Easter morning... but every Monday morning that you have to get up and go about meeting the demands of your life.

**Do not be afraid... when the earth starts shaking around you.**

**Do not be afraid, when you feel confused and restless.**

**It might just be the life of God breaking into your world.**

*For God so loved the world,*

*that God gave his only son,*

*so that whoever... that whoever, anyone and all of us*

*that would believe in him,*

*trust in him enough to live as if it's true,*

*might have [and know and live in] an eternal kind of life, even now.*

Amen.

Silent Reflection

*"The Cross is the greatest showing of God.*

*It discloses the first and deepest impulse of God, self-giving. It reveals that everything God does is a pouring out of love, sharing of lifeblood."*

*~J. Philip Newell, Christ of the Celts.*