

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026 – Table Copy

SILENT PREPARATION: If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

I Corinthians 15:19-22

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

Great God of amazing surprises, the story of Easter is ever new. Suddenly, we are reminded of your presence with us. Sadly, we had lost touch with you. Our minds were full of worries and distractions, set on things of this world. Our spirits felt the grip of death. And Jesus seemed a legend from the past; not a real person who shared our common lot. But – today – you awoken something new within us. We hear the cry – Christ is risen! – and we want to respond. Dry our tears and call our name; fill us to overflowing with the good news of Easter! Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Eternal God, we sing your praises:

You have raised your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,
from the grave,
and lifted him up as a sign of salvation
for all who place their faith in him.

Now stir up the gift of faith in us this day through your Word,
that we might both join Christ's victory song
and have confident assurance –
not just in the life to come,

but in each and every day of our earthly journey! Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING

Acts 10:34-43

As the reading begins,

Peter is in the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, and is asked to speak...

Then Peter began to speak to them:

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality,
but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right
is acceptable to him.

You know the message he sent to the people of Israel,
preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all.

That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee –
after the baptism, that John announced:
how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit,
and with power;
how he went about doing good,
and healing all who were oppressed by the devil –
for God was with him.

We are witnesses to all that he did – both in Judea, and in Jerusalem.
They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;
but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear –
not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses,
and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

He commanded us to preach to the people,
and to testify that he is the one ordained by God
as judge of the living and the dead.

All the prophets testify about him – that everyone who believes in him
receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 28:1-10

*As Chapter 27 of Matthew's Gospel ends,
Joseph of Arimathea has been given the body of Jesus,
placed it in his own tomb, and sealed it with a large stone.
And, a guard of soldiers has been dispatched –
to make sure that the tomb is secure....*

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."

SERMON

"Overcoming the Fear Factor"

"Do not be afraid" is a *very common command* in **Scripture**.

But – the reality is – it is one that is *much more easily said* than done.

Take **bugs, spiders, snakes, scorpions....**

Many people have *significant fears* of these creatures.

Indeed, **Mary Magdalene** – and the other **Mary** –
may have even been nervous –
about finding snakes, bugs, and spiders –
when they went to the **tomb of Jesus** on that **first Easter morning**.

But – *even if you're unfazed* by slithering reptiles, creeping insects,
and crawling arachnids – *there is still plenty* to be afraid of.

There is **fear of the dark**.

Although *most common* among children,
this fear can follow some people into adulthood.

You may remember this story:

My wife – **Mimi** – remembers the first night –
after she and our three children returned from **Germany** –
where we had been stationed with the **US Army**:

There, our **military apartment building** was *surrounded by streetlights* –
illuminating the adjacent parking lots.

It never got truly dark....

But now – back in the US – and staying at her parent’s house –
it was *totally dark* after the lights were turned off.

That was a *new* – and *quite frightening* – experience for our young children!

The **phobia** – generally speaking – *is not really* about **darkness**,
but – rather – about what **dangers** might be *lurking in the shadows*.

Maybe that is why the **two women** *waited until daybreak* –
to *make their trip* on **Easter morning**.

There is also the fear of enclosed spaces.

That’s *another common fear* – called **claustrophobia**.

People with this fear find it *unbearable to be inside* **small spaces** –
such as elevators, closets, and caves.

The **two women** in our Scripture reading *may have been feeling anxious*
about entering the **tomb of Jesus** –
which had been *carved out of solid rock*.

And – *today* – this fear has been *commercialized* in the “**Escape Rooms**” –
which can be found in a number of shopping centers....

There is also the **fear of death**.

While very few people have a *desire to die*,
some have a *crippling fear* of **death**.

It is can be *so overwhelming* that they *won't ever leave home* –
for fear of a deadly attack, or an accident.

And the years of the **COVID Virus** *did nothing to lessen* that fear....

In any event – on that **first Easter morning** –
fear was a dominant emotion.

Indeed – according to the **mental health website Youper** –
snakes, bugs, spiders, darkness, closed spaces, and death
are all top-10 fears!

We *traditionally sing* about the **joy of Easter**,
but – first – we *need to name the fear.*

So – *this morning* – let's *put ourselves in the sandals* of the **two women** –
as they came to the **tomb of Jesus.**

No sooner had they arrived, than 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.” (Matthew 28:2)

Some people have a **fear of earthquakes** – called *seismophobia.*

It is part of the **family of fears** – called *catastrophobia* – **fear of disasters.**

So, *no one would blame* the **two women** –
if *they were frightened* by this **violent earthquake.**

But – at least – the **angel opened the tomb**,
which *meant no more* fear of the **dark** – or fear of **closed spaces.**

The appearance of the angel *“was like lightning,
and his clothes were white as snow.”* (v. 3)

And, the **soldiers** – who *had been posted to guard the tomb* –
*“were so afraid of him that they shook,
and became like dead men.”* (v. 4)

So, who could blame them for being overwhelmed with fear?

Then, the **angel** said to the **women**, *“Do not be afraid.”* (v. 5)

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!”*

For example, the **Psalmist** *often leads us* in a *“Fear not”* prayer.

The **Psalms** are the **Bible’s** great *soul book* –
meant to *train us to respond* to all **difficult feelings**,
and **challenging life situations**.

And that, through *emotionally honest* **prayer in community**.

We’re **trusting the Lord** as we **love one another**. N.B, Galatians 6:2

In the New Testament, the *beloved disciple* – **John** –
summarizes the Bible’s promise to “*Fear not*”:

*“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another ...
There is no fear in love.*

*But perfect love drives out fear,
because fear has to do with punishment.
The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”* (1 John 4:11, 18)

So, “*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 this*.

They’ll say that the **Ten Commandments** *are the hardest*:

*“Remember the sabbath day ...
Honor you father and your mother ...
You shall not covet ...
You shall not commit adultery ...
You shall not steal....”*

(Exodus 20:8, 12-15)

Others will say that **Jesus** gave the *most difficult* commands –
when he identified the “*greatest*”:

*“Love the Lord your God ...
Love your neighbor as yourself....”* (Matthew 22:37, 39)

There is no question that this kind of love is an *enormous challenge*.

And, **Pastor Amy Butler** writes that “*Love your enemies*” (Matthew 5:44)
is the hardest commandment.

There is *certainly nothing* neat, clean, or easy about that.

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 **Two Great Commandments of Jesus**....

The challenge to **love your enemies**....

All are *very difficult* commandments to keep.

But *none are as tough* as “***Fear not!***”

We have *such great trouble* with “***Fear Not***”
because we are *afraid of so much*.

And – to be sure – *this is nothing new*:

Over **100 years** ago, **William Butler Yeats** wrote these, prescient, words:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

And – *in our own day* – we fear the deaths of loved ones,
serious illnesses,
not having enough money for retirement,
business, and bank failures,
climate change,
mass shootings,
terrorism,
and criminal activity.

Not to mention the opioid crisis, fentanyl,
our struggling educational institutions,
and the current economic situation.

We see *so many threats* to **our well-being** that –
when we *hear the words*, “***Fear not!***” –
we can *hardly believe it!*

But, the word **Gospel** means “***Good News!***”

That is, the **words that the angel spoke** to the women –
on **Easter morning** – are *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.” (Matthew 28:5-6)

The very **worst thing** that *could possibly happen* —
the **death of God’s Son** on a cross —
had *now been overcome* by his **resurrection**.

Darkness had been *replaced by light*,
and **death** had been *replaced by new life*.

“Then go quickly, and tell his disciples,” said the angel.

“He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee.

There you will see him.”

(v. 7)

The **promise of the angel** is that **Jesus** is *going ahead of us*;
always, *ahead of us*.

So, we *do not need to fear the future* – because **Jesus** *is in it*.

Jesus is *calling us forward* – and *promising to meet us* – in *what lies ahead*.

In fact, **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.

Some put off having children –
because they are worried about the dangers they will face.

We are nervous about retirement –
because we fear that we have not saved enough money.

And – when we are **stressed by uncertainty** –
we *cannot keep the commandment “Fear Not!”*

But – *when we realize* that the **risen Jesus** *is in our future* –
we can **lay our fears aside**.

On that **first Easter morning**,
the two women *“hurried away from the tomb,*
afraid, yet filled with joy.”

(v. 8)

Yes, *they still* felt **some fear**.

But – nevertheless – *it was beginning* to be **mixed with joy**.

And – *as they traveled* on the road –
 Jesus met them, and greeted them,
 and they fell down, and worshiped him.

Do you remember what **Jesus** said to them?

You *won't be* surprised....

He said, "**Do not be afraid.**

Go, and tell my brothers to go to Galilee;
 there, they will see me."

(v. 10)

Jesus repeats the *toughest commandment*, "***Do not be afraid.***"

But – *at this point* – the **women** are *able to keep* the **commandment** –
 because the **risen Jesus** is *with them*.

Jesus is *living out the promise* of the **name** –
 the **name** that was *given to him* before he was born:

Immanuel – which means, "***God with us.***"

(1:23)

Truly, **Jesus** is the *clearest possible sign* that **God** is *with us*,
 and *is with us* in the *face of every threat* to **our well-being**.

Friends, **Easter** gives us the **power to live** *without fear*,
 trusting **Jesus** to **lead us into the future** *with confidence*.

Although we will – most certainly –
 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 who is *waiting for us* in the future.

Since that very first Easter, followers of Jesus have found this to be true.

The apostle Paul faced 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 was able to testify:

*“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.” (Romans 8:35, 37, 39)*

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 –
and those during a time when there were both
a devastating pandemic, and a political revolution.

But – despite all of her hardships – she was able to say *“all will be well”*
because she had 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.

In him, *all will be well*, and *every kind of thing will be well*.

And *we can keep* the **commandment** – “*Fear not!*” –
because we have a **risen Lord**,
a **Lord** who *has overcome* anything that can hurt or destroy us.

Because **Jesus Christ** has *been raised*,
we do not have to be afraid.

Indeed, the **risen Christ** has gone on – *ahead of us* – into the **future!**

And, *that is true* both for each one of us – *as individuals*,
and for *us corporately* – as the **Green Hill Presbyterian Church!**

All thanks and praise; and all glory, and honor, and blessing –
be to our God!

Amen, and amen.

*** AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (Unison)**

From the Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

One: What benefit do we receive from “the resurrection” of Christ?

All: **First, by his resurrection he has overcome death, that he might make us share in the righteousness he has obtained for us through his death. Second, we too are now raised by his power to a new life. Third, the resurrection of Christ is a sure pledge to us of our own blessed resurrection.**

One: What comfort does “the resurrection of the body” give you?

All: **That after this life my soul shall be immediately taken up to Christ, its Head, and that this flesh of mine, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul, and be conformed to the glorious body of Christ. That, since I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, I shall possess, after this life, perfect blessedness, which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor any heart conceived, and thereby praise God forever.**

CHARGE AND BLESSING

Our charge this morning comes from today's Epistle reading –
from **Paul's letter to the Colossians**:

*So if you have been raised with Christ,
seek the things that are above, where Christ is,
seated at the right hand of God.*

*Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,
for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*

*When Christ – who is your life – is revealed,
then you also will be revealed – with him – in glory.*