

COVENANT WORD

Scared or Sacred

Acts 10:34-43; I Corinthians 15:20-22; John 20:1-18

A message by
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Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.

Sarah Shelton



We happened to be in the same group, Amy and I. She is a PhD in psychology, a coach for Fortune 500 company executives. With her quiet intensity, she told us that she was a cancer survivor. In the midst of her rounds of chemotherapy, she said that she received a quilt. Her students, executives mind you, made it for her. It carried the resemblance of a large picture window with each of the panes bordered with hearts. In each pane, the contributor had selected an image that mattered to him or her: a bouquet of flowers, a sunset, a poem, a prayer, a symbol of the work they had done together, a photo of the entire group. She shared about it from her journal: (*Stones at the Crossing*, Amy Webb, pg. 82-83)

I find in this quilt the miracle of how people connect through vulnerability. As a human community, we are like a quilt bordered in hearts, the seams strong when love is the basis for our work in the world. ...Together we risked taking off our comfortable masks and shaking up the routine of our lives, to make way for truths that needed to emerge. So I am calling this my resurrection quilt, sewn with memories that are life giving. I sit at the foot of this healing process and learn what the new incarnation asks of me.

Amy Webb's journey with cancer was one of stopping just long enough to consider if she was going to remain scared or if she might bless even cancer as being sacred.

The difference between *scared* and *sacred* is so much more than the transposing of two letters.

Scared is the job we lost, the friends we lost, the children we can't seem to reach in time.

Scared is being left on a gurney or a wheel chair outside the ER or the radiation room or a chemo-closet-operating-theater-x-ray-MRI-ultrasound-cat scan cubicle of fear.

Scared is a nation under siege, a nation at war, a nation adrift without a moral compass.

Scared is signing divorce papers, bankruptcy papers, eviction notices.

Scared is when the pastor retires, an interim falls into place and the search for a new pastor begins.

The difference between scared and sacred is so much more than the transposing of two letters.

Scared is when you can't remember your way home, or the words won't come or your brain is scrambled with an unwelcomed dissonance.

Scared is when darkness descends and your loved one is laid in a grave, mind you, no one prepares them properly for burial. So you return to the grave only to find that the body is gone! The tomb is empty.

Empty is what the house is after the last child has left.

Empty is the extra chair around the dining room table no longer needed.

Empty is what you are when you have given life all the energy, effort and hope you have and still come up lacking. (Amy P. McCullough, "Easter Sunday," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2019)

Empty is the tomb when Mary Magdalene arrives in the dark dawn of the morning.

She knows that this isn't how it is supposed to be. This isn't normal. Dead bodies don't just disappear. Ohhh, we better believe that Mary is scared. She is scared enough to run! Mary runs to get reinforcements. Then, Peter runs and the other disciple, known only, at this point, as the one Jesus loves, outruns them both. They take turns looking so that they see in stages. The men confirm that Mary is right. Her fear isn't creating some false reality. The tomb is empty. The body of Jesus is gone.

Now the scripture says that John, the other disciple, "saw and believed." What are we to make of that? I wonder what he believed exactly. His actions don't speak of faith. So is it referring to what men usually believe when a woman asks them to "come, check out this unlikely thing for yourself?" And so, he checks it out and believes that Mary has gotten it right this time? We can almost hear his thoughts, "Well, if that isn't the darndest thing! Honey, I never would have believed it if you hadn't-of showed it to me!" (Catherine Taylor, "Who are You Looking For?" *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2005) *These men! These men who denied and disappeared. These men who hide behind locked doors! These men* are the very ones who say absolutely nothing, return home and leave Mary alone at the tomb weeping. It is amazing to me that the resurrection ever gets proclaimed!! But then, there are the responsible women.

And in that moment, her fear, her confusion, her grief all disappear and are replaced by the sacred presence of love.

All four gospels agree that while her recorded companions may vary, Mary is the consistent presence at the crucifixion and at all the events on Easter morning. (James Baker, "The Red Haired Saint," *Christian Century*, April 6, 1977) There is no scriptural evidence that she has formerly been a prostitute or that she has long red hair, but she did have the audacity to be no one's wife or mother. (Baker) Likewise, scripture doesn't provide us with the end of her story either. Was she

martyred or does she return to a quiet, uneventful life in Galilee? No one knows, because Mary drops from the pages of scripture on Easter afternoon. However, she doesn't disappear until she tells the good news of the resurrection making her the founder of the Christian faith. (Baker) It's amazing to watch really. One after another of these "normal" followers of

Jesus are changed. They lose their fear to live into the sacred because they are so loved. They quit trusting what is usual and normal to live into the unexpected. They stop hiding and start seeking. They stop making excuses and start moving mountains. They sell all their stuff and put the proceeds in a common pot so that no one is in need. They lay their hands on the sick. They defy the authorities. They never tire of telling people who gave them the courage to do such things, and their joy becomes contagious. If anyone wants to know what being "saved" is all about, all they have to do is look at a follower of Jesus. See? This is how saved people live. See? This is how the sacred comes from being scared. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation," *Journal for Preachers*)

The book of Acts will eventually tell us about the moment fear turned into the sacred for the disciples. But we do not have to wait for Mary's story. Mary sees two angels in the tomb. Interestingly, they don't talk about resurrection. They do not mention that Jesus is not there. They do not even mention the obvious of "do not be afraid." No! These angels are busy ministering to Mary's need. Tenderly they ask why she is weeping. Maybe it's her grief; maybe it's her tears; maybe it's her fear, but Mary talks to the angels like it is the most normal thing to do.

About this time, another character enters the story. He is dressed as a gardener, which leaves me to wonder if there is not some gardener somewhere in Jerusalem looking for his overalls and boots. He asks Mary the same question as the angels, "Why are you weeping?" Then he asks her the same question he asked the disciples when they are first called. He asks: "Whom do you seek?" Even with all these clues, Mary does not realize it is Jesus until he says her name. And in that moment, her fear, her confusion, her grief all disappear and are replaced by the sacred presence of love.

James Broughton in "Easter Exultet" puts it this way:
(paraphrased in part)

Don't dawdle.
Don't doubt
...walk toward clarity.
At every crossroad
Be prepared
To bump into wonder.
[Because] only love prevails.

A few years back, Chris Hamlin and I wrote a book about all the things congregations teach their pastors. On our "wild" book tour, which mainly consisted of Tabernacle's and Covenant's fellowship halls, we fielded some questions and answers. I clearly remember being asked "What is the most important thing your congregation has taught you?" And my answer was, "I don't have to be afraid anymore." Covenant, in our time together, you moved me from scared to sacred, for...

Sacred is standing with a couple as they take their vows before God.

It is holding the children of the church as we dedicate ourselves to them.

Sacred is standing beside the grave and brazenly throwing Mardi Gras beads in the face of death confidently knowing that we have the victory through Jesus Christ.

It is watching the children gather for the Sermon on the Steps as they greet one another oblivious to barriers culture might construct.

Sacred is leaving behind entire systems of ways to be Baptist in order to know the freedoms of principles like the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church.

Sacred is dining with the homeless; an open communion table; a free pulpit.

Sacred is your congregational singing and anthems that bring me to tears.

Sacred is pale pink roses blooming on fences amidst the horn-blowing, siren sounding, can't-wait-to-get-home- traffic on the Southside.

Sacred is serving as your pastor within and without of the doors of this church for these 18 years.

Every pen I have picked up over the past two weeks has run out of ink. Every pad I've pulled out of my desk has only one sheet of paper remaining. Every nail in the wall is empty; the shelves all empty; computer files empty. But what is *not* empty is my heart and soul. They are full of laughter, quiet moments, happy celebrations. They are full of music and prayers and well thought-out congregational decisions. They are full of stories barely whispered and stories loudly told; of faces full of pain and faces full of joy...and sticking around long enough for those faces to be one and the same. They are full of mind power that is trained to be sharp and vibrant and of the wisdom that comes from years of street living and trying to just get by.

If I were making a resurrection quilt, like my friend Amy's, there are so many life-giving memories that would stitch it together in love. Should I find that I am afraid, I will wrap myself in all the ways you have attended to my sermonic efforts often quoting back

to me my own words that I do not remember, or the ways you ask questions not caring if I have an answer or not. I will wrap myself in the ways you have loved my family and I will cherish all the ways my family has loved me by doing everything they could to support me by investing themselves at Baptist Church of the Covenant.

Wherever we end up worshiping, I will think of you when I proudly sing "Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost." I will think of you when I see all the "he," "he," "he's" scratched through in my Bible and replaced with a capitol "G"; and I will think of you every time I replace being scared for the sacred.

I was told so many things about you by the illusive "them." I am so grateful that we proved "them" all wrong. I wasn't near the feminist-on-crusade as supposed and you aren't quite the liberal...well, maybe you are! Whatever you are, I have consistently found you to be patient and kind, tender hearted and forgiving. I have found you to be loving and generous. Your hospitality cannot be separated from grace, and if that makes you/us/me liberals, then I guess we are.

While Mary found the tomb empty, she soon discovered that emptiness filled by the presence of Jesus. Being scared suddenly turned into the sacred. What seemed to be an unholy ending, quickly

***But what is not
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turned to a sacred beginning. My prayer for you, dear Covenant, is that whatever has you scared will be transformed into a sacred beginning. If you will remember, we began this journey uncertain, a little scared, but I think we are ending it with the blessing of a journey we can clearly claim as sacred. In his poem, "Everlasting" David Whyte writes:

...we live in the light and the love of those
who came before us, and who helped us to see
and celebrate and recognize ourselves
and who brought us here and whose light
we now pass on, so that even at the end
of time, even in what looks like silence,
even in the quietest sense of disappearance,
even in the far distance of times beyond
our present understanding, we will be remembered
in the way others still live, and still live on, in our
love.

Let us remember one another, my dear Covenant, with love, for love casts out fear (1 John 4:18) to make room for the sacred. May it be so, Amen.