

Fear and Loathing in Jerusalem

Matthew 28:1-10

Hunter S. Thompson grew up not far from Douglass Boulevard Christian Church. Highlands neighborhood. Went to Male High School. He was a kid with a chip on his shoulder and a serious conviction that the official version of things was almost always a story somebody ***paid*** for.

He went on to invent what he called "*gonzo journalism*," "immersive, first-person, and deliberately unhinged. Gonzo journalism eventually gave us a phrase that's become shorthand for a certain way of moving through the world: **fear and loathing**.

Fear and loathing in Las Vegas. Fear and loathing on the campaign trail. Fear and loathing as a permanent American condition.

What Thompson understood, and what made him both essential and frustrating, was that fear isn't just something people feel on their own. Fear, it turns out, is also something **systems** produce. Deliberately. Methodically. Unceasingly.

Keep people terrorized, and they won't ask questions. Keep them off-balance, and maybe they won't notice who's actually running things.

Keep them doubting their own perceptions, and they'll accept almost any official explanation for what they're seeing with their own eyes. ("Don't pay any attention to the man behind the curtain.")

Hunter S. Thompson spent his career writing about a country that had gotten very good at that particular trick.

But he wasn't the first to notice how effective the trick is.

Two thousand years ago, outside a city that had some experience managing fear, two women got up before dawn and walked toward a sealed tomb.

These women weren't expecting much, except maybe, hopefully, the smell hadn't gotten up a head of steam. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had been at the crucifixion. They saw the whole thing. So, they knew up close and personal what Rome could do when it needed to make a point.

Here's what I don't think most modern Americans understand: Crucifixion wasn't just one form of execution; it was a kind of theater. Slow, public, deliberately degrading theater designed to put everybody on notice that they'd better think twice before getting any ideas.

The whole point was the fear it produced in onlookers. Pilate understood that. The chief priests understood that. The system worked the way it was **supposed** to work.

So these women went to the tomb. They walked the way people navigate a world that's just given them an extra-special lesson on what it costs to hope for something different.

No, they weren't coming to celebrate, but to tend a body.

But, I mean, let's face it, they went to do the work of grief that nobody **else** was going to do: the washing, the anointing, the quiet labor of love that honor and shame economies never count and certainly (God forbid!) never compensate.

But when they got there, something happened that **nobody** was counting on: the ground shook.

Matthew uses *seismos* ... that is, shaking, shocking, commotion, from which we get words like "seismic" and "seismology." It's the same word he uses for earthquake that he uses for the storm at sea and for the moment Jesus died, when the temple curtain ripped from top to bottom.

In Matthew's Gospel, that kind of shaking marks the moments when God breaks into the world as it *is*. In Matthew, when things start shaking, God's up to something.

An angel descends, rolls back the stone, and sits on it. But the angel wasn't anything they were expecting, was it? With an appearance like lightning, and clothing white as snow. And the guards, the ones Rome and the temple authorities posted to make sure death stayed locked in place where they could keep an eye on it, they crumple to the ground and become, Matthew says, "like dead men."

Think about that for a minute.

The guys assigned to secure the dead become, **themselves**, like dead men, while the dead guy they **were** guarding has apparently high-tailed it to more inviting climes.

Matthew's irony is the whole argument.

The angel's first word to the women is this: "Do not be afraid."

Now, before we get too far down the line, it's important to notice what that sentence **doesn't** do. It doesn't stop the women's terror. Matthew tells us explicitly that when they left the tomb, they ran "with fear and great joy," both at once, unresolved.

Did you ever notice that the Marys didn't stop trembling before they could tell the truth? The fear's still there. Only now, it's got company.

Let's slow down for a minute. There's something I shouldn't rush past here. We live in a world saturated with voices telling us **not** to be afraid. Politicians, cable news anchors, pastors: They all say it. But not all of them mean the same thing, partly, I suspect, because there's a lot to fear right now.

Sometimes "do not be afraid" is designed to produce compliance. It's said to calm the room, manage the crowd, and keep the lid on. Don't make a scene, don't ask too many questions, trust the process, trust the officials, trust the story we're telling you. Just, you know, trust us.

Fear managed **this** way becomes a tool. Keep folks just afraid enough to stay in line, just calm enough not to do something stupid like organize.

But that's not what the **angel** says.

The **angel's** "do not be afraid" is immediately followed by a commission. Go. See. Tell. Run. The command gives them new perspective on their fear without solving it, refusing to let it determine whether truth gets spoken.

The women are still shaking when they leave. But still they run.

This is the kind of fear Hunter S. Thompson was writing about: that system of **managed** fear, where the bright lights of the official story outshine the women's "harebrained" account of things. The official story involves the deliberate cultivation of self-doubt in people who see something real. That's **exactly** what the angel pushes back against.

The women aren't reassured, so they'll keep **quiet**. Instead, they're commissioned (ordained, if you will) so they'll preach.

There's a difference, and a congregation needs to learn to ask which kind of "do not be afraid" it's hearing.

See, Thompson's loathing wasn't just disgust at the world. It was something more specific: the experience of being in a system that works overtime to make you doubt your own perception. You saw what you saw. You know what you know. But the official version is better-funded, better-dressed, and backed by people with better hair, and the authority to call you a liar.

Let's slow down for a second to remember that Matthew includes something in this story that the lectionary cuts short. The lectionary reading stops at verse 10, but that's a few verses too short.

Immediately following our passage for this morning we get, as Paul Harvey used to say, the "rest of the story":

"After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, 'You must say, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep." If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is told among the Jews to this day."

So, while the women are running to tell the men what they've seen, the guards are on their way to the chief priests. When the chief priests hear the story, they don't argue or try to explain the empty tomb. They just pull out the checkbook.

Matthew calls it "a sufficient sum." The guards get a story to tell: that the disciples came by night and stole the body, and a promise of protection if the governor hears about it. The bought story hit the wires, and it's **still** circulating, Matthew says, to this day.

That's the loathing part. Not just that the empire sealed the tomb, not just that they posted guards, but that when the tomb turned out to be empty anyway, the first thing the system did was to buy a better story.

The **women's** testimony, on the other hand, didn't cost **anything** to produce, but it cost everything to believe.

The alternative story told by the guards cost "a sufficient sum." But the big wheels in charge figure it was worth every penny to keep the witnesses from being believed.

The women tell the **truth** first, while the systems take their time catching up. The people with the least protection and the least institutional credibility see something real, but the people with money and power move faster than the speed of sound to explain it away.

But that pattern isn't just first-century Jerusalem, is it? Any community that's ever watched an official story steamroll the thing that all the witnesses ***knew*** to be true knows what's going on.

Think about Renee Good and Alex Pretti. I mean, it's possible to capture everything in high definition video and still have it not be enough to slip past the “official account” without being contorted into something unrecognizable.

Resurrection, it turns out, isn't just a theological claim about what happened to Jesus. It's a claim about whose testimony counts as ***true***.

And then, while all of this is happening, while the guards are taking the money and the women are still running, and everything is still up in the air, Jesus meets them.

Now, notice that this isn't **after** they've sufficiently processed their feelings or gotten a handle on their fear. Jesus meets them in the middle of their tangled, running, afraid-and-joyful moment, and he says: "Do not be afraid."

See, there it is again. And that second time it's said is important. It wasn't enough to hear "Do not be afraid" once at the tomb, from the angel. Soon, the risen Christ finds them **still** afraid and says it again for good measure.

Which tells us something crucial about Easter faith: It isn't the kind of thing we arrive at once and keep on a shelf. Indeed, it has to be renewed because the machinery that executed Jesus is still humming, still generating cover stories. It's still disciplining memory, still trying to make witnesses doubt their own seeing. And beyond that, it's **still** teaching us to trust the voices of the powerful more than the testimony of the transformed.

And the risen Christ calls the disciples, the ones who fled, the ones who couldn't be bothered with the "women's work" of tending a body, the ones who are inevitably going to struggle to believe the women's report, he calls them siblings. Not servants or subordinates. Jesus doesn't call them "the knuckleheads who failed me." No, he just calls them family.

The first word to the ones who ran away, then, isn't a reckoning, but an invitation. Come back. Come to Galilee. Come to the place where the whole thing started, where the disciples were first called, where the Sermon on the Mount was delivered.

Come back to Galilee, to the margins, to the economically exploited, ethnically mixed, politically peripheral place where God apparently prefers to spend God's time.

The risen Christ isn't waiting at the center of power. He's already ***moving***, headed to Galilee. Back to his old stomping grounds.

According to Matthew, Jesus is already heading there, already leading the way out back to the place where the people can't get Caesar's boot off their necks.

Moreover, God isn't standing still at the end of the journey, waiting to be found. God's even farther ahead, already among the people with the least protection and the most to lose.

So the women ran.

Matthew says it like that. An economy of words. "They left the tomb quickly, with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples."

They didn't wait until the fear cleared up and the night sweats ceased. They didn't wait until they had the right words, or until they were sure somebody would believe them, or until the official

story had been adequately refuted. Instead, they ran scared and joyful at the same time. They'd been given a job to do.

That's about as honest as Easter gets.

The resurrection doesn't give us a world without things to fear. The tomb stays empty, yes, but the machinery that sealed it is still very much in business, producing official narratives and funding alternative explanations. It's still working to make the witnesses doubt what they saw.

What the resurrection gives us is a word that keeps getting said. By angels. By the risen Jesus. By communities that have heard it enough times to believe it might actually be true. True enough to start running, anyway.

The risen Christ is already in Galilee with the peasants who had the absolute **least** to gain from the way empire plays chess with people's lives.

Interestingly, the women are still running when Matthew stops telling the story. They just keep going, full of fear and joy, toward wherever Jesus is, which is to say, toward home.

The only question left is whether we're willing to follow.

—Amen.