The appearance of the angel “*was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow*” (v. 3). The soldiers posted to guard the tomb “*were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men*” (v. 4). Who could blame the soldiers for being overwhelmed with fear at the sight of a heavenly being? (BTW: the fear of angels is called angelophobia!)

**Fear Not.** Then the angel said to the women, “*Do not be afraid*” (v. 5). It would be great if just saying it made it happen! We could all be free to love and be loved, to live and let live. We long for more of God’s peace amid stress, danger, and uncertainty. The beloved disciple John summarizes the Bible’s promise to “Fear not” this way: “*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).

The angel understood the fear the women felt, 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 is said that there are 365 ‘Fear nots’ in the Bible: one ‘Fear not’ for every day of the year!” Imagine that! Coincidence or God-instance?!

The command not to fear is 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 stands with you, granting peace in times of stress, danger, or uncertainty. “Fear not” may be a very common command, but it is more easily said than done. In fact, “Fear not” is probably the toughest of God’s commandments to keep.

Some people might claim that the Ten Commandments are the hardest: “Remember the sabbath day… Honor you father and your mother… Do not murder… Do not commit adultery… Do shall not steal” (Exodus 20:8, 12-15). Others will say that Jesus gave the most difficult commands in his Great Commandment: “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.

Pastor Amy Butler believes that “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44) 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 as tough as “Fear not!”

**Fear Replaced by a Promise.** We struggle with “Fear Not” because we are afraid of so many things. We fear the deaths of loved ones, serious illnesses, not having enough money for retirement, business failures, climate change, mass shootings, terrorist strikes, 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 meant for us as well. “*Do not be afraid*,” the angel 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). In these words, we begin to understand why we no longer need fear anything. The very worst thing that could possibly happen, the death of God’s Son on a cross, is now overcome by the resurrection. Darkness is replaced by light, sin is replaced by grace, and death is replaced by new life.

“*Go quickly and tell his disciples,*” directed 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 already (and always) ahead of us. We need not fear the future, because Jesus is already in it. He calls us forward and promises to meet us in whatever lies ahead.

Most of our fears are grounded in uncertainty about the future. We do not 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 enough money. 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 those fears aside.

On Easter morning, the women “*hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy*” (v. 8). They still felt some fear, but it was fear mixed with joy. As they traveled on the road, Jesus met them and greeted them, and they fell down and worshiped him. And what did Jesus say 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 can easily 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*” (1:23). Jesus is the clearest possible sign that God is with us, in the face of every threat to our well-being.

**All Will Be Well.** 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 faced many terrifying threats to his well-being, yet, because he believed in Christ raised from the dead, Paul 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*” (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: she had life-long struggles during a time when there was a devastating pandemic and a political revolution. But Julian 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 God who loves us. All will be well, and every kind of thing will be well because Christ is risen. We can keep the commandment “Fear not!” because we have the Spirit of God with us, and the Spirit can overcome anything that seeks hurt or destroy us. Because Jesus Christ is risen, we do not have to be afraid ever again.

Julian of Norwich’s Prayer:

In you, Father all-mighty, we have our preservation and our bliss.

In you, Christ, we have our restoring and our saving.

You are our mother, brother, and Savior.

In you, our Lord the Holy Spirit, is marvelous and plenteous grace.

You are our clothing; for love you wrap us and embrace us.

You are our maker, our lover, our keeper.

Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well, and all shall be well,

and all manner of things shall be well. Amen.

**Sources:**

* Butler, Amy. “The Hardest Commandment.” *Patheos*, February 19, 2017, www.patheos.com.
* Gaultiere, Bill. “‘Fear Not!’ 365 Days a Year.” Soul Shepherding*,*www.soulshepherding.org.
* Leonard-Fleckman, Mahri. “Julian of Norwich believed ‘All will be well.’ Would she say so today?” *America,*June 24, 2020, www.americamagazine.org.
* Putnam, Anne. “Humankind’s 10 Most Common Fears (And How To Overcome Them).” *Youper,*[www.youper.ai](http://www.youper.ai).

**The Toughest Commandment**

Sunday, April 9, 2023 [Matthew 28:1-10](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+28%3a1-10&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

When Steven Spielberg directed the movie, Jaws (1975), his special effects team created a mechanical shark, which Spielberg hoped to use extensively during filming. Unfortunately, the shark had mechanical problems, so Spielberg made some last-minute adjustments. For example: the opening scene pictures a woman swimming in the sea, with the famous softly thumping background music, and the shark’s-eye view from below. When the shark attacks her, what we see is the startled look on her face as she is pulled down into the depths. You never see the shark, which makes the scene *more* terrifying. The things we do not see are so much more terrifying than those we do.

**Fear of the dark** is called nyctophobia. This phobia is not really about the darkness, but about what dangers lurk in the shadows. Again, what we do not see scares us more than what we see. Maybe fear of the dark is why the two women waited until daybreak to make their trip on Easter morning.

**Fear of closed spaces** is claustrophobia. People with this fear find it unbearable to be inside small spaces such as elevators, closets, or caves. On Easter morning, the women may have felt anxious about entering the tomb of Jesus, dank and dark, carved out of rock.

**Fear of death**, or thanatophobia, is such a crippling fear for some people, that they will never leave home, for fear of a deadly attack or accident. I wonder if the women on the way to the tomb thought about or feared death?

On the first Easter morning, fear was a dominant emotion. We sing about the joy of Easter, but first we need to name the fear. Put yourself in the sandals of the women: as soon as they arrived at the tomb of Jesus “*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). The fear of earthquakes is called *seismophobia*; it is part of the family of fears called *catastrophobia* (the fear of disasters). No one could blame the women for being 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.