

Sermon by Ana Raffai, Sesvete, Croatia on Mt 28:1-10
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We have chosen the last chapter from the Gospel of Matthew to look at the message "Do not be afraid". I want to put the text we heard earlier into a dialogue with our own experience, with our current personal, family, social and political situation. In this context, what do I expect from the encouragement: "Do not be afraid"?

If I am honest, my daily life and my commitment to peace are full of fears.

I am worried about my children. Like so many young people they have to constantly struggle. Their position in the workplace is not ideal, the risk of unemployment, the unequally distributed power, the lack of respect on the part of their bosses, and the absence of fair regulations for the employees do not really enable them to fulfil themselves personally in their work.

I am also afraid of developments in our society since the war. For us, democracy does not always mean freedom: the rights of women and minorities are threatened. We are not free to live according to our own values. We do not escape the collective control that imposes its authority on us and that cannot imagine that not everyone accepts this authority and these imposed values. I fear that the faith articulated in public space is losing its deeper meaning, and that it is unable to advance people and society towards more humanity. I fear that the majority church, my Catholic Church in Croatia, is becoming an instrument of domination over the whole of society and losing what makes up the essence of its mission.

The political situation around the world makes me fear a gloomy future where the strong swallow the weak, where lies are circulated, and, if constantly repeated, pass for truth. I also fear that the love of the neighbour is disappearing in my Christian tradition and being replaced by the love of the homeland.

I trust the words of the angels and the risen Jesus: "Do not be afraid." What practical support can we find in this text of Matthew's Good News in order to stay upright and free ourselves from the sources of fear?

The text starts with two women. Mary on Magdala and the other Mary are going to the tomb of Jesus. This reminds me of our meeting of Believers for Peace, which took place two months ago in Lužnica. One of the strong messages of Nerzuk Çurak, our presenter from Sarajevo, was as follows: to get from negative to positive peace, women must be more involved in the business of politics.

In our text, the women are present. They have the courage to openly show their friendship - or at least their sympathy - for a man who has just been condemned and crucified. They expose themselves, visibly, and through this courageous act they rehabilitate a criminal: even if he has suffered the death of a criminal (an outcast), his body is treated as that of a normal citizen (someone included).

For many biblical interpreters, the presence of the women at the tomb of Jesus means that they are full of love for him. This is true, but only a part of the truth. They are also full of strength. They react differently from the guards who lose consciousness in the face of the sudden event (the light, the lightning, the white-clad angels, the rolling stone, all this frightens them). The women, however, are active in communication with the angel, they understand his message, take his words seriously, and know how to follow his instructions. They show self-confidence and confidence in the angel.

The angel (verse 7) as well as Jesus (verse 10) have no doubts that they are able to proclaim the resurrection of Christ to the disciples. The angel and Jesus recognize the ability of the women to testify before the disciples. It is the men / the disciples who do not trust the women. Even on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) the disciples took much more time to recognize Jesus in their companion than the women in our Matthew text did.

The women are worthy of a respectful communication. This communication with dignity and without discrimination seems to me to be a clear sign that the women are in a context marked by the resurrection event. For us today, when we build human relationships that are characterized by dignity, respect and respect for human rights, we are at the very heart of an action for a just and truthful society. This is what the New Testament calls the "kingdom of God".

In order to participate in this work, we must, from time to time, face the mistrust of the women which we meet in our society, and even more in our church. The words "Do not be afraid" are expressed to encourage us to resist the mistrust of the disciples, which is still repeated in the conduct of women and men. "Do not be afraid" means here: do not forget the words and the behaviour of the angel, stand firm and do not just adapt. Instead, change situations that give the impression that Jesus has not risen.

For me personally this resistance is a big task. Being able to speak to you here is something I owe to my own inner struggle, which Muslims call "the great jihad". I was educated and deeply shaped in a tradition in which the woman is supposed to be silent. The struggle between this tradition and the words we have just heard (Mt 28:1-10) continues inside of me: on the one hand, I dare to interpret the gospel; on the other hand, I am afraid of it. In this dynamic of the struggle, I run the risk of becoming violent. In the face of this danger, I am looking for a support in the message "Fear not, do not be afraid": this message helps me to transform my aggression resulting from a sense of impotence into a force of resistance that is based on the way Jesus and the angel respect the women and regard them as worthy enough to testify.

The surprise of the resurrection has a precise place in Matthew, an exact time: it is the time when day and night meet each other (the Sunday morning). Time makes day and night meet. Dorothee Sölle presents this as a theological motif: where the resurrection is revealed, doubt is always present. She underlines that "one of the last verses in Matthew (Mt 28:17) ends with 'but some doubted.'" For Dorothee Sölle, doubt is healthy because it saves religion from the danger of certainty, it protects against the danger that faith may become a closed explanation of the world, from the danger of excluding from the language of faith any poetry of hope. At the same time, it protects against the danger of no longer rising up against injustice.

The place is the empty tomb. The women went into the tomb. They did not turn their heads away in the face of the problem of death, they faced up to it. In a discussion on the question "What should we hope for today?", Fulbert Steffensky reminds us of the scene of the women in the empty tomb, explaining that hope only becomes an action when one makes an effort (looking at the grave was hard for the women), and not if one remains passive or flees, overwhelmed by pain. The struggle is the way to hope.

What does this mean for us today? What are the graves we see? For the place where death is guarded (this is a grave) is where we do not want to find death again. I think of death in the sense of dead relationships, or of severe conflicts. We see ourselves as dead in these graves because we realize that our expectations of life or of some people, often of our neighbours, are dead. Death is a deep disappointment. In the wider sense, the place of death, the grave, can be an event in society that makes us feel buried alive, in a mood

full of unresolved conflicts so that people become tired, frustrated, apathetic. Even the church sometimes appears to be a grave in which the power of the Spirit is unable to set us in motion. What then does the message "Do not be afraid" mean in such situations?

The message of the resurrection in the context of the empty tomb means to me that if we experience the death of our expectations, of relationships, of society - as the grave of democracy - and the church - as the tomb of the Gospel, then we have to become aware that there is time after, there is another life. At the moment of death I do not know how this "time after" will come, but I believe it will come. The only support I "possess" is the word, the promise of Jesus. The resurrection offers the possibility of a re-interpretation, a reframing, to get out of the 'frame' of the graves, that was imposed on us, or in which we find ourselves again. Even if these tombs are real places of death, we can overcome them, because we know that, thanks to our faith, we have an active role to play. We know by faith that there is an event after the grave. This event redefines the grave as a passage to the light. The pain of this passage gets its meaning in this movement. It belongs to the liberation process. When we understand the tomb as a passage to life through the way of victory over death, we escape from bitterness and despair, and can entrust ourselves to the promise of the Risen One that God's will is not mistrust but trust.

At our conference in Lužnica, Azra Ibrahimović underlined that trust is the opposite of fear. Even in suffering, when we face "the empty tombs," we can keep a sense of good will, an attitude which is deeply nonviolent, without leaving the struggle. We should not be discouraged by the fact that the structural violence is continually being repeated. In the Gospel according to Matthew, it is written that even as the women are hurrying to deliver the news to the disciples, the soldiers "take a great sum of money" to spread the lie that Jesus' body was stolen (Mt 28:15).

Structural violence continues, but it does not diminish the sense of the struggle that is being waged against it. On the contrary, in the struggle we discover the realization of the promise that life will gain the upper hand over death. This promise confirms to us the sense that it is right and good to resist the sources of injustice where we find them, to resist the driving forces of violence, where we uncover them, and to resist cynicism which deceives us into believing that our efforts are futile.