My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God who reveals truths to our Spirits and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.
 Spring cleaning always gives me time to review those things that I’ve collected over the years, and 2023 is no different. So I’d like to share with you the genesis of today’s message that first took flight from my friend Alice MacKenzie, who I met while I was in seminary, and who left me some years ago with some thoughts for this morning’s message. Angels, she said were delivering a message.

So let’s play with that a little bit—suppose the angels in Matthew's gospel were package delivery people. When I think of the delivery person, I am focused on the FedEx truck, and the fellow who has done our route for a few years now. He's friendly enough, but he is there to deliver a package, not to sell it to me. He drops off a package for Kate or me, but he doesn’t say, "Hey Mark, I know you love coffee, since I always see you with a cup in your hand. There’s this new coffee maker that has gotten 4.8 out of five stars in terms of reliability and taste. Here’s a discount coupon you can use to buy it along with their coffee, which I also I highly recommend."

Our FedEx person is there to deliver packages, not there to be my buddy or to empathize with me. "Hey Mark, how are you feeling about your new coffee maker? I know getting used to a new coffee maker can be a change in taste and aroma, so I just want to reassure you that this will be a positive addition to your home and to encourage you in the big step of accepting it into your home." He sometimes gives Grace a doggy biscuit if she’s outside, but otherwise, he’s the man to ring the doorbell, hand me the package, and hold out the clipboard for me to sign for it. He’s on a schedule, and focused on making all his deliveries.

Can you see it, that the angels in Matthew's gospel are like my Fed Ex person? The angels arrive, and are focused on their job—to deliver the Good News. They are not there to sell it to us. They are not there to be our buddy or to empathize with us. They're there to deliver their package, and it's up to us to sign for it, open it, and use it. The Good News is only ever preceded by one short, preliminary sentence: "Don't be afraid." Where else have we heard that? (take all answers). Here’s a few:

"Don't be afraid, Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John."

"Don't be afraid, Mary."

"Don't be afraid, shepherds. I bring you good news of great joy that shall be to all people."

"Don't be afraid, Joseph, take Mary as your wife. Her baby is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Name him Jesus; he's going to save all people from their sins."

So today, the angels say, what? "Don't be afraid”. They deliver the package, ask us to sign for it, open it, and use it.

But how about the drop off scene of the package in Matthew's version of the Resurrection? This is an angel who knows how to make an entrance. He comes in with engines roaring, tires squealing, and the ground shakes as a result. The angel rolls back the large, sealed stone. This is an angel with attitude. The angel rolls back the stone, sits on it, and looks so beautiful in the snow white uniform that angels delivery services wear. The angel peers over at the guards who are displaying certain physical symptoms of extreme terror we won't go into. But the angel isn’t there to deliver the package to the guards. That first delivery try of the package is being reserved for someone else, or, actually, two someone elses.

Rolling their angel eyes, as if to say: "Take that, Caiaphas. Take that, Pilate. This is what God thinks of your effort to put the Messiah in a tomb! A tomb as a prison for the Prince of Peace, the Son of God? Think again! A tomb for his final resting place? I don't think so." Then, for the main message, the angel’s eyes turn softer and brighter toward Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (whom in Matthew is probably the mother of Jesus) and says: "Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised, as he said."

Matthew wants to make sure we notice these three little words "as he said." Because in Matthew's gospel, Jesus told us so—three times. Jesus tried to deliver the good news package to the disciples in Matthew’s gospel three times, but they refused to sign for it. Why do we—like them—despite the witness of Scripture, tradition, and our life of worship and service, still come to so many situations looking for spiritual death when we have been promised the living water of eternal life waiting there for us?

Is it because when we look to the past that the world has dashed our high hopes? Things didn't turn out like we hoped? Circumstances went against us? Other people disappointed or hurt us? Maybe we’ve heard some of these things along the way:

"You're breaking up with me now? And through a text?"

"I thought I was in line for that position when Pat retired."

"But I watch my diet and exercise. What do you mean I have cancer?"

"Shouldn't there be a heartbeat at twelve weeks?"

"She was baking a cake just this morning. What do you mean she’s dead?"

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Tragedy seems ever-present. So often we only hear the first half of Jesus' prediction: "The Son of Man will suffer and be killed..." but forget what comes next? Why do we come to so many situations alert to signs of death, disappointment, and defeat, when we have been promised life and hope that is waiting on the other side of those things? Is it because, when we look to the future, with what we know of life, we know that difficult situations lie ahead?

We like to say in the UCC that we’re people of the resurrection. We don’t deny the hard things or the hard times. But we can say that, with the help of God, we get a new start. One day we wake up from the trauma in a new place, or thinking a new thing, or experiencing the companionship of a friend who has come to spend time with us and just be. Maybe where we belong most is right back where we started from—created in God’s grace, in God’s image, with the hope of the world in front of us.

It's why Easter is for the children. And why God says that we should be more like them, and to let the children come without hindering them, for such is the kingdom of heaven. My prayer for you this day, my brothers and sisters, is to look out into the future with the eyes of resurrection.

Thanks be to God, Amen.