

Because They Were Afraid

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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John 20:19-31 (Common English Bible, slightly altered)

¹⁹ It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the religious authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” ²² Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.”

²⁴ Thomas, the one called Didymus (the Twin), one of the Twelve, wasn’t with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples told him, “We’ve seen the Lord!”

But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.”

²⁶ After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!”

²⁸ Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Jesus replied, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.”

³⁰ Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples’ presence, signs that aren’t recorded in this scroll. ³¹ But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

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Soundtrack for sermon writing: “*Love > Fear*” by The Many.

“We don’t know what the next 24 hours are going to bring, and if it should be what we fear, then the peace and quiet within us will come to our aid.” —Mrs. Murry, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* by Madeleine L’Engle

“One madman in Vesputia can push a button and it will destroy civilization.” *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* by Madeleine L’Engle

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This is perhaps not the Sunday-after-Easter sermon you’d expect.

Preachers sometimes preach the sermons we ourselves need to hear, and that is true today.

Because this sermon is about fear, and this sermon is about what we do with fear, and why Easter matters when we’re afraid.

Monday and Tuesday, I wrestled with fear. Monday and Tuesday, a lot of us wrestled with fear.

This sermon is also about what the risen Christ offers to fearful people. This sermon is about the peace of Christ, the peace which surpasses understanding, the peace which Christ offers three times in our text today, the peace that we all need.

Let's get into it.

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“It was still the first day of the week.”

It's still Easter Day, and in John's Gospel several people have seen the stone rolled away, have looked inside an empty tomb, but only one person has encountered the risen Christ.

It's still the same day,

“that evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid...”

They have locked themselves up to try to stay safe. They're scared.

Are they afraid of critique? No, it's more existential than that. They are in a locked room, they fear danger.

What does fear feel like? It's different for everyone - for some folks, we feel off center, off kilter, we can't get ourselves together. There are physical signs of fear, quickened heartrate, that feeling in your belly that's half way between cramp and nausea, that lump in your throat. Fight, flight, or freeze.

Poet John O'Donohue says, "when the light around you lessens / and your thoughts darken until / your body feels fear turn / cold as stone inside."¹

Some of us, when we're afraid, we go to ground. We hide from everyone. (If you've noticed someone missing, you might check on them. You might ask: are you afraid?)

Some of us, when we're afraid, we need company.

The disciples - maybe Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and Salome are there with Peter, Andrew, James and John), the folks in that locked room have chosen to gather, to talk, pray, grieve, question, wonder. Being with a group helps them. Maybe it gives them a sense of safety. Mostly I'm like this. I process things in community.

I need to hang out with my people.

But some of us, when we're afraid, need to be alone. Maybe Thomas needs to be alone.

Some of us need to *do something*. I need to bake, call my loved ones, organize, make a to-do list, make a plan even if I figure the plan won't work.

Maybe Thomas needs to *do something*.

Thomas isn't there. How does Thomas respond to fear? We don't quite know. He isn't there.

¹ John O'Donohue, in *To Bless the Space Between Us*

Maybe he's keeping on keeping on. Working through the to-do list. Keeping appointments. Maybe he's filled with so much nervous energy he can't be contained in a locked room. Maybe he's fear-shopping, making sure there'll be enough wine and bread and protein bars and toilet paper for an extended crisis (wait, that's me again).

Maybe he's sitting by the lake, staring into the blue sky that spring afternoon. We don't know. He isn't there.

But we can guess something about Thomas. He's afraid, too. He isn't there with the group, but we can be pretty sure, he's afraid.

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So most of Christ's followers are together, hiding behind locked doors, afraid.

That's where the Risen Christ meets them. In their fear.

The Risen Christ is known for meeting us where we are.

The Risen Christ meets them, in their fear.

And the very first thing out of Christ's mouth is:

Peace be with you.

"Jesus came and stood among them. He said, 'Peace be with you.'²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy.²¹ Jesus said to them

again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.'"

The very first thing, and the second thing, the risen Christ says to this group of followers, the ones gathered in fear in a locked room, is:

Peace be with you.

Every resurrection story is a little different, and in this story, the first word is Peace be with you.

On Sundays we start with this word, the peace of Christ be with you. And usually I think of it as a greeting. Hello. Welcome. We're glad you're part of this community.

But in this story, Peace be with you is a response to fear, grief, confusion, doubt. A word of comfort, assurance, calm, courage. Listen now, don't be afraid.

They are gathered in a locked room because they are afraid and the risen Christ says, Peace be with you.

The Risen Christ meets us where we are.

And when Thomas comes back and the risen Christ appears, the resurrected one's first words *to Thomas* are:

Peace be with you.

Resurrection means that God shows up. Like Thomas, it's hard to believe when we have heard it second hand. But God is showing up in our world, and bringing us a message of peace and courage that is ours to hold on to, through it all.

This Easter season, even when the headlines make us afraid, especially when the headlines make us afraid, feel the word of peace that we are offered by the risen Christ.

Breathe. Receive the Spirit. Take courage. Stick together - take care of each other. You're going to get through this. Not only that: I've still got good, holy, important work for you to do. And you won't be alone.

I sat with a clergy friend on Friday, having coffee. She said today, she is also preaching about what to do in times of tumult and fear. She's preaching: Do what you can, and hold together as a community.

There's a recent book by Hanna Reichl, *For Such a Time As This: An Emergency Devotional*. It was recommended to me by a Pilgrim member, and I've been working through it this week.

Reichl says, about the tumult we're all living through, "This storm is not a natural catastrophe, It is an intentional strategy. It is meant to shock and awe, to overwhelm and debilitate, to create panic and shatter energy. The projection of unstoppable power will be self-fulfilling if you let it. Don't let it....Evil draws power from fear. Don't give it more power."

The disciples are behind locked doors, wondering if the religious authorities are going to turn them in, wondering if the Romans are coming for them next, afraid.

The Risen Christ, who has walked through fear, who has overcome the worst, meets them. The Risen Christ shows up. The Risen Christ calms them down, offers them a peace which surpasses understanding, a peace which meets them even in times of fear, and gives them purpose, and sends them out to do the will of God.

And a week later, the Risen Christ does it again.

And the good news is, for us, too - we who have come along later but are still afraid, we who have not seen the wounds with our own eyes, we are also met by the risen Christ, offering peace.

I'll close with a prayer Marian Wright Edelman lifts up in times of storm and struggle:

“Lord, please help us to hang on.
Please don't let us give up.
Help us to remember that, like the sun in the morning, You come when it's time.”²

Christ's Peace be with you, all, always.
Amen.

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I'm not using this quote today but it was meaningful to me this week!

A long time ago, 1933 to be precise, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a sermon on fear. He described the experience of fear as being in a boat in rough waves:

“Let's say there is a ship on the high sea, having a fierce struggle with the waves. The storm wind is blowing harder by the minute. The boat is small, tossed about like a toy; the sky is dark; the sailors' strength is failing. Then one of them is

² Included in Marian Wright Edelman's book, "Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations for Our Children"

gripped by . . . whom? what? . . . he cannot tell him-self. But someone is there in the boat who wasn't there before. Someone comes close to him and lays cold hands on his arms as he pulls wildly on his oar. ... Suddenly he can no longer see or hear anything, can no longer row, a wave overwhelms him, and in final desperation he shrieks: Stranger in this boat, who are you? And the other answers, I am Fear. Now the cry goes up from the whole crew; Fear is in the boat; all arms are frozen and drop their oars; all hope is lost, Fear is in the boat.

Then it is as if the heavens opened, as if the heavenly hosts themselves raised a shout of victory in the midst of hopelessness: Christ is in the boat. Christ is in the boat, and no sooner has the call gone out and been heard than Fear shrinks back, and the waves subside. The sea becomes calm and the boat rests on its quiet surface. Christ was in the boat!"

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"Howeve,...what you have surely all been qui-etly wanting to say for some time, that today Christ is no longer doing such amazing things. He is so strangely hidden away that we often think he is no longer there at all! Dear brothers and sisters, what do we know about what Christ can do and wants to do for us, this very evening, if we will only call upon him as we should, if we call out, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" That was fear all right, but it was faith in the midst of fear, because it knew where help comes from, the only place. We say there are no miracles anymore . . . but what do we know really, you and I? We will certainly be ashamed of ourselves if one day we are allowed to see what God can do.

They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” We can well understand their amazement. What sort of person is this on whom fear has no effect, who overcomes the fear in human life and takes away its power? By asking this question, we are already on our knees before him, praying to him, pointing to him, the wonder worker, and saying, This is God!”³

³ <https://politicaltheology.com/overcoming-fear-sermon-dietrich-bonhoeffer/>