

Easter 2 – April 19, 2020 Cycle A

Last Sunday I noted that the disciples, that human beings in general, suffer from the fear of death. But when it comes to facing death's specter, the unknowability of it, the English word "fear" is probably not "vivid" enough. People suffer from all sorts fears – "phobias" the psychologists call them... the fear of flying, of closed spaces, of heights and so on. But "fear" is just one possible translation of the Greek word "phobia", and I would argue that when it comes to death, "fear" doesn't really convey the emotion. We do not merely "fear" death, we're terrorized by the thought. We associate death with the world of "things that go bump in the dark". Death gives us the "shivers", the "cold sweats". Overcoming our terror of death is a life-long struggle – one that ebbs and flows, depending how close we feel to "death's door". Mostly, we try to go about our daily "business" and ignore our "fear" of death. But then something happens to shake us out of our complacency, and death's terror strikes with unexpected power.

That's what happened on 911. It was just another ordinary Tuesday morning in NYC when the first airplane struck the World Trade Center. After that, the "jihadists" got exactly what they wanted – terror: striking the fear of imminent, unpredictable death into the minds of all Americans. And afraid we were, of terrorist attacks, of suspicious looking neighbors, and ultimately of death itself. Our "fear" lasted for a while, even boosting church attendance. But 19 years has allowed our fears to fade; time for complacency to return and church attendance to drop.

2020 will likely be remembered as the year of the "coronavirus". In less than 4 months over 154,000 people have died from the disease. And whereas 911 was mostly a US "thing" causing far fewer deaths, COVID-19 doesn't care about nationality, or race or creed for that matter. Sex seems to matter a bit; more men die on average than women, though medical science isn't sure why. People are afraid. They willingly wear masks in public – when they go outside at all. There are some, of course, who imagine that the virus can't "get" them, that they're too young or healthy or whatever. You see them on the news, defying quarantine restrictions, gathering in large groups. It's not that they aren't afraid of death; they're just ignorant of the reality, of death lurking nearby.

Jesus' disciples did not suffer from such ignorance. Neither, for that matter, did anyone within the Roman Empire. Death was Rome's "tool"; its means of control. Death was common. Death by disease was a regular occurrence, as was death due to starvation and neglect. To be 40 was "old". By the time Jesus lived, death was so common that Rome had to invent ways to keep it sufficiently frightening. The arena was one solution. A quick and "humane" death was no deterrent against threats to the state. In a world where death was common and life short, why not resist Roman oppression? Therefore, Rome made death a "spectacle" – feeding "criminals" to wild animals and forcing them to fight each other in displays of "blood sport". Yet, even the arena had its limits when it came to deterrence. Successful gladiators became "heroes" to the crowds, and villains did not always lose. Something "more" was needed; something "economical", brutal, and efficient; a method that could be applied everywhere and didn't require a large "venue". Crucifixion was the answer. Death on a cross was almost unimaginably brutal and slow. Crucified "criminals" suffered enormously. As a "spectacle", it was nothing short of terrifying!

After seeing Jesus suffer and die in this almost unimaginable way, the disciples were "locked

behind closed doors in fear”. Who would not be afraid? The disciples were hiding. They did not want to be caught by the authorities who had had Jesus arrested, “tried”, and crucified! The disciples, of course, loved Jesus. They had seen him do amazing things. They wanted to believe that “he would rise” – the reports of the women who had seen him! But it was difficult. Death’s terror had them – especially as night fell... In that moment, when they were understandably afraid, Jesus came and stood among them – despite the locked doors! They “jumped” in fear! Was this a “ghost” come to torment them? But instead of blood curdling shrieks, Jesus offered his “Peace”! Relief... hardly describes what they must have felt. Death had not come for them. Instead, it was their beloved teacher, Alive – just as he had said! (He Is Risen!) For proof, Jesus showed them his hands and side.

To us, this seems a gesture of reassurance, as I’m sure it was intended to be. But seeing Jesus’ wounds was something more – a reminder of the brutality of his death, of the cost of standing up for the truth. In the midst of such thoughts, the disciples heard Jesus say, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”. Can you imagine? The idea of being sent on a mission that had cost Jesus so much? Jesus quickly followed with a blessing, “Receive the Holy Spirit”, but I’m not sure that the disciples heard. They were likely still thinking, “Oh my God! Just look at the holes in his hands!” How could they not? Terror had them too distracted, too overcome to embrace Jesus’ calling. For a full week later we again find the disciples huddled behind closed doors – along with a very skeptical Thomas. “If Jesus truly has appeared to you, why are you not more ready to follow his command?” That’s what I make of Thomas’ reaction to their witness. If the disciples could not convince one of their own that “Jesus had risen”, how were they ever going to convince anyone else? And so Jesus came the second time, and allowed Thomas to not only “see” his wounds, but touch them – to know with unshakable certainty that this thing called death, is not the end! With understanding dawning upon him, Thomas exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!!!”

What will it take for us? What do we need to see and touch to truly believe that death is not the end, that indeed it has no power over us? Death is, of course, **real**. Jesus **really** died! He **really** suffered pain, felt life drain from his body. In one sense this **is** frightening. The path to life that Jesus offers does not mean that we can escape death, only that death **cannot** hold us! This is not an easy truth to “wrap your head around”. It’s not an easy “fear” to overcome. There is no “therapy” that can remove the terror of death. Only one thing can: GOD’S PROMISE OF LIFE BEYOND DEATH! Jesus returned from the most terrorizing form of death then known that we might have exactly this reassurance: God promises **life** to all who have faith, who **trust** in the words and example of Christ! And one thing more; Jesus gave us God’s Promise: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have to believe”!!!

Death **is** frightening. Despots throughout history have used death as a tool to gain and hold power. Its “specter” terrorizes us. Yet, on account of what God has promised in Jesus Christ, we who trust ourselves to him need not fear death! And so, its terror cannot cause us to turn against neighbor, hoard resources that are needed by all, or prevent us from standing up for those who have no one else to defend them. God calls us to live as a loving people, a community willing to give of itself for the good of all. Jesus showed his hands and side to the disciples, not to scare them, but to prove that even the worst the world can do cannot separate us from God’s love or from one another! In Jesus Christ, “death has lost its sting”! He Is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!