

Easter – April 12, 2020 Cycle A

The 3 days since Jesus' betrayal, arrest, "trial", and execution had been the worst time in Peter's and the other disciples' lives. They were lost, alone, and overwhelmed by feelings of shame and grief. Just as Jesus had predicted, all of them had abandoned him at the moment of his greatest need – even Peter, "the Rock", the one on whom Jesus said, "he would build his church". While the rest had fled into the night, Peter had tried to stand firm, yet still ended up denying Jesus the "3 times" – again, just as he had foretold! Yet, ironically, this also proved a source of hope, for as Jesus had predicted his own death, so also had promised that after 3 days, he would rise again! But no words, no amount of warning or discussion had prepared them for what had happened. To see Jesus – their beloved teacher, leader and friend... one on whom they had set so much hope – beaten, tortured, humiliated, and nailed to a cross for all his enemies to jeer at... it was just too much, especially when remembering that at the critical moment they had deserted him! Thinking through the events of that day was unbearable. And so it was hard to keep hope alive, that indeed Jesus would rise again. Even more, the disciples had heard that guards had been stationed outside Jesus' grave. If Jesus were to rise, what would prevent them from arresting and killing him a second time?

Fear, as much as hope, kept them together and in Jerusalem. They were afraid of being arrested, of "being found" out on the road to Galilee. Now that Jesus was gone – along with his popularity with the people – they were vulnerable. They had gone everywhere with him: Galilee, Judea, Samaria – even Tyre and Sidon! Where could they run that someone would not know, that they might be betrayed to the authorities? Staying put seemed to be their only choice – hope that Jesus' words would come true one more time, that somehow, he would rise and escape the authorities' grasp. It was a lot to hope for. Wanting to know, to see for themselves, several women among them, including "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph" (*compare* Mark 15:40, 47), had gone out to see the tomb. The two "Marys" believed they could do so "unnoticed", and so despite the risk they headed out just before dawn. On their way, the ground shook beneath their feet – such that they could barely stand. Arriving at the tomb the women were astonished to see it's blocking stone "rolled back" and an angel from heaven sitting upon it! The guards nearby were frozen in fear, unable to move. Just as the two Marys were about to flee, the angel spoke to them, saying, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised"! (He Is Risen! He Is Risen, Indeed! Alleluia!) The angel showed them the place where Jesus had been laid and told them, "Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised!' and indeed is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him"! Filled with "fear and great joy", the women ran from the tomb – to share this wonderful news with the others! (He Is Risen! He Is Risen, Indeed! Alleluia!) But before they could go far, Jesus himself stood before them and said, "Greetings! Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me"!

Fear and doubt are powerful emotions. They blind and paralyze us – prevent us from seeing things as they truly are. They feed our feelings of grief and regret and keep us from "moving on". Fear and doubt kept the disciples from following Jesus when he needed them. Fear

and doubt kept them silent, when should have been protesting the inhuman treatment Jesus received from the “supposed leaders” of Israel! Fear and doubt kept Peter and the others “locked behind closed doors” – preventing them from witnessing Jesus’ tomb being broken open and the power of death itself dispelled! Doubt and the fear of death causes people to do foolish and unthinking things. Today, at this very moment, toilet paper is in short supply in our grocery stores! Why? Because people are afraid. Ours is “the most powerful nation on Earth” in terms of military might and advanced defenses. Yet we “shake in our boots” and are frozen in place on account of something so small that no eye can see it. Why? The answer is fear – not of tiny things, but of death.

Once, out on the Sea of Galilee, a storm came up and threatened to swamp the small fishing boat the disciples were in. In that moment, a lifetime of experience on the water deserted Peter and the others and they didn’t know what to do. Why? The fear of death had them in its grasp! In panic, they woke Jesus and exclaimed, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!”

In our time we are perishing, drowning in a sea of fear and doubt. It’s “in the air” so to speak. Like the disciples, we need to hear Jesus, remember his words, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” In the context of the storm on the Sea of Galilee we might understand Jesus to have meant that he would not let them drown; that wind and water are well within his control. And it was, of course, true. Jesus “rebuked” the storm and it was gone! In the context of Easter, of God’s victory over death, the event on the Sea takes on new significance. In Jesus Christ, God can rebuke and overcome death as easily as the storm was stilled! The lesson of Easter is plain: even should we drown, yet shall we live! (He Is Risen! He Is Risen, Indeed! Alleluia!)

We gather today in Spirit and not in person. Yet this is not because we fear death. We would not suspend services on account of some threat of violence. We are separate today, on this holiest of days, not because we “fear” our neighbor, but because we love them and have no desire to see anyone needlessly suffer the effects of debilitating disease! In Christ we need not fear death! In Christ’s Name we dare not sow harm to others! And so today, we choose to only share God’s Peace via electronic means – text, email, telephone... And we trust that one day, hopefully not too far off, we will resume our normal practice of worship once again. When we do, it will not be because science as overcome all disease and death, but because the risk of causing harm to others has lessened to “normal” levels.

Fear and doubt have the power to separate us – from reality, from neighbor, and even from life. How many things, how much good do people fail to do on account of fear? A person might not “like” us, so we are afraid to say “Hello”. A person might not want our help, so we are afraid to offer. How many wonderful opportunities for life are “passed over” on account of fear? Far too many. In Jesus Christ, God has conquered death! Therefore we need not fear! Therefore, let the lesson of the present time be this: that we strive to have our actions governed by love, compassion, wisdom, and intelligence – and not by fear. For truly, “**He Is Risen! He Is Risen, Indeed! Alleluia!**” Have a blessed Easter. Amen