

Sunday, April 27, 2014
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Sermon

What are you most afraid of?

I mean your biggest fear – the type of thing that can keep you up at night.

Is it fear of death?

Fear that something will happen to your children?

Fear that you will run out of money?

Fear of getting sick?

Fear that you don't know what is next in your life?

Fear of being alone?

Fear of being attacked?

The disciples, locked in a room in Jerusalem are afraid of many things.

They are afraid the same people who crucified Jesus will pursue them.

They are afraid of what the future might hold for them.

Remember, they had each walked away from a livelihood to follow Christ.

Now what?

Have you ever had a “Now What” moment, when circumstances have changed and you are unsure of what will happen?

I think we have all had at least one.

Life is actually made up of these moments.

“Now What?” moments are often riddled with both doubt and fear.

We are afraid of the unknown.

Uncertainty unnerves us.

We like to be in control...to know what is going to happen next.

Our lives, however, rarely follow our carefully laid plans.

One of the great lessons of Christ's resurrection is that new beginnings are always offered.

In this post-Easter season the lessons of God's astounding power linger.

We remember that God's steadfast love conquered death.

We remember that we are promised this love for eternity.

Right into the midst of uncertainty and doubt, Jesus appears and says, "Peace Be With You."

Calm down, don't worry, I'm here.

Whenever we're afraid and hiding out, all locked up, God comes to us in the midst of our fear and offers peace.

Whatever doubts churn in our minds, whatever sins trouble our consciences, whatever pain and worry bind us up, whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely, God comes to us and says, "Peace be with you."

Of course, we are not always so willing to trust divine intervention.

Thomas doesn't believe his friends – he wants to see Jesus for himself. He has doubts.

Faith and doubt are often seen as opposites.

But the Scriptures make it clear that they are both a part of our journey.

When faced with the resurrection, the disciples of Jesus certainly struggled with questions, uncertainties, and doubt.

This wrestling, however, was not viewed by Jesus as a problem.

Rather it was accepted as part of the disciple's development of faith.

There's a difference between doubt and unbelief.

Unbelief is a choice not to believe.

Doubt, on the other hand, is an honest wrestling with belief.

Our doubts are a path to ever deepening faith.

Any set of beliefs that cannot endure questions and doubts is useless for navigating the challenges of our world.

When we embrace our faith struggles as natural, and as part of the process, our doubts and questions strengthen and deepen our faith, because they drive us back to God, back to prayer, and into deeper reflection.

Jesus' focus is on Thomas's journey to faith.

We may be tempted to consider Jesus' last words to Thomas as a rebuke: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*, but it is an affirmation for those reading John's gospel – they have not seen and yet they believe.

Jesus did not condemn Thomas for his doubts – he gave him what he asked for to solidify his belief.

This is how the Spirit of God works in our lives.

What Thomas wanted was nothing more than the other disciples had already experienced.

They had encountered the risen Christ and Thomas longed for the same.

He yearned for a faith that was real and living and honest, and Jesus gave him what he sought.

An encounter with the risen Christ always calls us to deeper belief and to share life with others.

In today's encounter Jesus does not just offer reassurance – he commissions the disciples to go out into the world, blessed by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“As the father has sent me, so I send you.”

Those are not very encouraging words from someone who has just been killed for doing the work he was sent to do.

But Jesus provides the disciples with a bonus to get them out there.

He breathes the Holy Spirit into their beings.

He infuses them with God's spirit; with love; with courage.

Sometimes we need tangible reminders of our ability to do something.

In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah – the same verses that were celebrated in our anthem today - we hear of one of God's seraphs flying to Isaiah holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.

The seraph touched Isaiah's mouth and said, “Now that this has touched your lips your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.

Isaiah responds by answering God's call with a resounding “Here am I; send me!”

I gave the children bracelets this morning as a reminder of their capacity to be kind – to do something nice for someone else. Of course, they each have the ability to do this, but sometimes a reminder helps.

Our celebration of the Eucharist is one such reminder.

Each time we take the bread, or drink the cup, we are reminded of Christ's sacrifice and God's redeeming power.

We remember that Jesus humbled himself to the point of death to provide us with new life.

We remember that in the simplest meal of a piece of bread and a cup of wine, Jesus comes into our midst and offers us peace.

The classic story, the Wizard of Oz, is perhaps one of the greatest retelling of this biblical story.

The all-powerful wizard grants a heart, a brain, and courage to Dorothy's travelling companions.

He bestows upon them gifts that they already possess, just hadn't claimed.

What gifts might you have that you have yet to live into?

What type of tangible reminders would unleash your abilities to go out in the world and answer God's call?

You see, my friends, we are all plagued with fear and uncertainties in our lives.

We lock ourselves in rooms of our own design.

We create emotional barriers that keep other people away.

But the beauty of our faith, the rich reward that comes with belief, is that God sends not only His son, but His Holy Spirit as well, into our lives to provide us with His peace and comfort.

Whatever the fears were that you named in the beginning of this sermon, I invite you to lay them aside and trust that the peace that Christ promises is yours for the taking.

Of course, things will go wrong in life (note my bike accident injuries) but we don't have to surrender to circumstances.

We are a resurrection people, which means that we can rise up from the worst possible situations (think crucifixion) and choose to live in the presence of the one who offers us peace.

Picture your body being purged of fear – physically cleansed of all the anxiety and worries that plague you and replaced with the holy spirit – pure and clean and full of love.

We know that the disciples made this choice.

We know that they left that locked room and went out into the world to spread the good news of Christ's resurrection throughout the world.

We know that the Holy Spirit – the gift that Jesus breathed upon them – sustained them and gave them the courage to live up to the example of their beloved teacher.

The great and powerful wizard of OZ gave Dorothy, the scarecrow, the tin man and the lion gifts that they already had.

Jesus gave Thomas the same thing, and he gives it to you.

You have faith.

You have courage.

You are love.