

***The Good Kind of Fear***  
**A Sermon on John 20:19-31**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**  
**April 19, 2020**

**Introduction**

The Sunday after Easter is a time for stories about post-Resurrection appearances. There are two appearances in today's text: one to the disciples and one to Thomas.

Appearances are a form of grace. God's presence is made visible to us in a time of crisis. The people are fearful and the appearance of the holy comforts them and drives out their fear so they can participate in the mission that God entrusts them with.

**First Move: Two Appearances in a Time of Crisis**

It is the evening of Easter Sunday in Jerusalem. The disciples are gathered in a room. It doesn't say how many disciples; it is not necessarily limited to the original 12. It may be a bigger group of all the believers in Jerusalem.

They may have heard Mary's report that she had seen the Lord. Apparently they didn't believe her. They also may have heard the report of the Beloved Disciple, who saw and believed when he looked into the empty tomb. Apparently they didn't believe him either.

The door is locked for fear of the Jews. The Greek word for fear is φόβος; it appears four times in the Gospel of John, and it always refers to fear of the Jews. As we talked about in the story of the blind beggar a few weeks ago, John's gospel most likely was written in a time of crisis: followers of Jesus were being kicked out of the synagogues because they believed that Jesus was the Christ. John's gospel was written in part to encourage followers of Jesus to come out of hiding and to openly proclaim Jesus as the Christ.

In the midst of this fear, Jesus comes. The disciples have been hiding, but Jesus knows where to find them. Jesus takes the initiative and comes to the disciples. He may have passed through a locked door. The text doesn't say.

Jesus says, "Peace to you." There is no verb. It is a declaration, like many we have heard in the Old Testament. *Fear not. God's peace has come to you.* Jesus gives the disciples what they need for faith.

## **Commissioning**

This text is sometimes called John's Pentecost. It is an alternate gospel reading on Pentecost Sunday this year. Luke's Pentecost also takes place in Jerusalem, but it is 40 days after Easter Sunday instead of the evening of Easter Sunday.

Jesus commissions the disciples: "Just as the father sent me, I also am sending you." Jesus has high regard for humanity in the Gospel of John. He sends the disciples on the same mission as God sent him. That mission is set forth in John 3:16. God sent Jesus to the world to offer the gift of eternal life to all people. The disciples now are entrusted with this mission.

Jesus breathes on the disciples and gives them eternal life, just as God breathed on Adam in Genesis 2:7 and gives him physical life. It is a new creative act of God: life in the spirit. Eternal life in the Gospel of John means sharing in the life of God.

Jesus gives the disciples the authority to forgive sins. In John's theology, it is a time of judgment. Eternal life is available to people right now if only they will accept it. If they accept the gift, the disciples are empowered to release their sins. It is a sin to reject the gift of eternal life. If people reject the gift, they remain in sin. They condemn themselves to living apart from God.

## **Bridge**

Thomas is not with the disciples when Jesus makes his first appearance. Just as the disciples did not believe Mary and the Beloved Disciple, Thomas does not believe the disciples when they tell him, "We have seen the Lord."

Thomas insists on seeing the mark of the nails in his hands and putting his finger in the mark of the nails and putting his hands in his side. Thomas is cast in a negative light by insisting on seeing before he will believe. Jesus has previously spoken against people in the Gospel of John who insist on signs.

## **Second Appearance**

A week later the disciples again are in a room, perhaps the same room, and the doors are shut. Apparently they are still fearful of the Jews. Thomas is with them this time. Again Jesus comes. Again Jesus says, "Peace to you."

Jesus does not respond negatively to Thomas. He offers to let Thomas put his finger on the nail marks on his hands and put his hands in the wound in his side. Jesus gives Thomas what he needs for faith.

Tradition calls this the story of Doubting Thomas, but Jesus never uses the word doubt. He says, "Do not become unbelieving but believing." In Greek it is, "Do not become *ἄπιστος* but *πιστός*." *Πιστός* is an adjective that means faithful or believing; *ἄπιστος* means unfaithful or unbelieving. Thomas is confronted with the same choice as everyone else makes when they are confronted by Jesus: either to

believe that Jesus was sent by God to offer eternal life or to reject him and be separated from God.

Thomas' fear and disbelief melt away. He recognizes that God is standing before him. He falls on his knees and says, "My Lord and my God."

### **Postscript**

Jesus pronounces a beatitude. "Happy [or blessed] are those who did not see and yet believed."

The Gospel is turning its attention to present and future disciples who have not seen yet believe. All the stories to this point in the gospel are about people who saw and believed. From here on, people will no longer have the benefit of having seen Jesus in person to help them believe. They are in the same situation as the generations of Jews who were *not* present with Moses on Mt. Sinai to witness the handing down of the Ten Commandments. A famous rabbi in the third century said:

A proselyte is more precious to God than those crowds who stood on Mt. Sinai. If they had not all seen the thunder, and the flames, and the lightning, and the quaking of the mountain, and had not heard the sound of the trumpet, they would not have submitted themselves to the dominion of God. But the proselyte has seen none of these things; and yet he comes, and surrenders himself to God, and takes upon himself the yoke of his will. Can anyone be more precious than he?

These later generations of Jews came to see the presence of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Later generations of Christians came to believe through reading the gospel stories that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and offers us eternal life. Happy are we if we believe without having seen. We are precious to God.

## **Second Move: Living in an Age of Fear**

Michael Kinnamon, a Disciples scholar, has written a book called *The Witness of Religion in an Age of Fear*. His thesis is that we Americans are living in an age of fear when threats are exaggerated. Kinnamon finds wisdom about responding to fear in all the great faith traditions. His purpose in writing the book is to rouse religious communities to share these teachings about fear with our neighbors.

Kinnamon says that fear can be a blessing *and* a threat. Fear is useful when it alerts us to the presence of danger. Our body springs into action. We no longer take the time to process information through our rational mind. The reptile brain takes over. Data goes straight to our nerve endings. When we step into the street and suddenly see a speeding car approaching, we don't have time to weigh the risk. Our heart jumps into our throat and we get back. We may even dive back. We have

survived as a species because our ancestors were fearful. They were hard-wired to respond instantly to threats.

Fear becomes dangerous when it is excessive or misdirected. Americans used to be known for their confidence. Now our perception of the world has come to be increasingly shaped by fear.

### **Defining Events**

9/11 is one of the defining events of our lives. We all remember where we were when we first saw or heard about it. I was in my first semester of seminary in Tulsa. My Introduction to Theology class with Joe Bessler has just started. Mady Fraser, the seminary chaplain, came into our room and interrupted the class to tell us about the first reports of the airplanes flying into the twin towers.

We were fearful. How could this happen? Where will they strike again? Random violence is especially scary. These people were just starting their work day in these office buildings when the airplanes flew into their buildings. Their lives were snuffed out without the chance for fear to kick in and help them flee. They didn't do anything to provoke this. It could happen to anybody.

Today is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of the Murrah Building. We all remember where we were then, too. Many of us knew people who died in the bombing.

### **Responses to Defining Events**

There were healthy responses to these acts of terrorism. Concrete pillars were installed in front of all federal buildings to keep someone from driving a truck close to the building. The Department of Homeland Security was created to focus on identifying terrorist threats and keep them another 9/11 from happening. Communities pulled together to support the victims of the tragedies and their families.

There were also unhealthy responses, where fear was excessive or misdirected. The United States invaded Iraq. The government said it was in retaliation for Iraq's part in 9/11, but we later found out that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11. We initiated a war that result in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and created instability throughout the Middle East.

Instead of targeting the response to those who executed the attacks, the U.S. government universalized the response to create a war on terror, just as it had earlier created a war on drugs. Americans became conditioned to treat all Muslims as potential terrorists, just as white Americans came to treat young black men as potential criminals. It created a high level of anxiety that was guaranteed to keep people afraid. Kinnamon cites a 2013 study that shows that the odds of an American

being killed in a terrorist attack, either in this country or overseas, is roughly 1 in 20 million.

The media willingly played along. I can't watch local news at 10:00. I haven't watched it for 30 years. Local news has always focused on sensational stories about local crime. We hear about some horrible crime and the followup investigation for days. After the Murrah Building the local news channels initially focused on a report that a Muslim man had been responsible for the bombing. They showed his house and interviewed his neighbors.

Network television isn't any better. Fear gets good ratings. How many *Law and Order* spinoffs are there? We have had *Law and Order: CI*, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Law and Order, LA*. Do they have one every night? Now they are on syndication and you can find them just about any time of the day.

Every year there is a new round of bills at the legislature to expand the guns laws. The violent crime rate has been going down for 20 years, but apparently people believe that the police can't protect them. Instead of trying to reduce the violence in the world, our legislatures are authorizing private citizens to use lethal force whenever they feel threatened.

The coronavirus pandemic has led to a dramatic rise in gun sales, as if a gun is going to protect us from a virus. Kinnamon quotes a philosophy professor who writes: "Guns do not liberate us from fear. They are a symptom of fear's domination over society."

We have created a fear-industrial complex, built in large part by politicians and the media. We have an incredibly elaborate security apparatus that now has a stake in keeping people perpetually afraid.

### **Third Move: Fear Can Be Transformed into Awe**

We are living in the midst of another defining event. We are rightly afraid of the coronavirus. It is deadly; it is now the leading cause of death in the United States. It is mysterious; it is transmitted silently by people who are asymptomatic. We don't know who has it and who can give it to us. Our best scientists don't know how to cure it. We may never get a vaccine. It might mutate like the flu and whatever vaccine we come up with will only fix last season's strain of the virus.

Some of us are particularly susceptible to the virus. It is especially deadly for those who have heart and lung problems, the elderly, those who have auto-immune problems, those with asthma and allergies.

The only way that we can keep it from spreading is through social distancing. We can no longer gather in groups of more than ten. We now have a definition of

essential and non-essential businesses. Restaurants, movie theaters and sporting events have been shut down. We have to wear masks when we go to grocery stores and pharmacies.

Millions of people have lost their jobs as restaurants and other non-essential businesses have been forced to close. Many small businesses may never recover. People who had a good salary two months ago have lost all their income and are forced to go to food banks.

### **The Right Kind of Fear**

We need the right kind of fear to respond to this threat. Fear gives us a surge of energy. Robert Augustus Masters, a psychotherapist and spiritual teacher, says that fear is basically excitement in disguise. Pay attention next time you are afraid and notice how you feel. It gets your blood circulating. The feeling of fear easily mutates into arousal. Why do you think teenagers like going to horror movies?

The problem with fear is that it makes us contract. It makes us say to ourselves, *I am not safe, I am in danger*. We close our minds to processing new information. We try to run away from fear. It is easy for us to transfer that feeling of fear onto misdirected targets.

We can choose what we do with our fear. Instead of letting that energy consume us, Masters encourages us to face our fear and harness the energy it generates.

Kinnamon believes that churches can have a word of comfort for those who are living in an age of crisis.

Fear in the Bible is an expression of unbelief, a sign that one does not trust God. Jews and Christians overcome their fear of worldly danger by fearing God. Proverbs 9:10: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We fear God not because we believe that God will punish us. The word for fear in Hebrew and in Greek can also mean awe or reverence. We fear God because God is holy.

Awe is what we feel when we confront a reality that surpasses us. We lose our sense of self and lose ourselves in what stands before us. Awe humbles us. When God on his throne confronts Isaiah and asks him to deliver the word of the Lord to the people, Isaiah says, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." He is overpowered by the sense of holiness that God evokes. We fall on our knees, just as Thomas did, not because we choose to, but because we have to. It is an involuntary reaction. Masters says that awe has the power to transform us if we stay in touch with what it has stirred in us.

Fear pushes us away, but awe draws us near. We are irresistibly attracted to the holy. This makes awe compatible with love and joy. Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian, says that without fear or awe, what we love is not “the holy and awesome Creator of all that is but only a small, convenient idol.”

### ***The Courage to Be***

The theologian Paul Tillich wrote *The Courage to Be* in 1952. It is a classic book; it was a national bestseller. Tillich believes that Christian faith gives us the courage to confront our fears instead of being driven by them. Courage is the strength to affirm one’s life in spite of the anxiety of despair and meaninglessness. Our Christian tradition shows the folly of trying to depend on ourselves alone. We need to know that we are accepted, that we are a beloved child of God. We also need to reach beyond ourselves to find courage. To experience the fullness of life we need the courage to be ourselves and the courage to be a part of something greater than ourselves.

### **Fear Triggers Our Compassion**

Fear is a great leveler. We see that terrorists and viruses strike randomly, they can attack anybody. That can trigger our compassion. Compassion is hard-wired into us, just as fear is. Compassion kicks in when we see that someone is vulnerable, that they are suffering through no fault of their own. Compassion is seeing a person as God sees them.

Compassion is what enables the health-care workers to overcome their fear and treat patients even when it exposes them to the risk of catching the virus. We can be in awe of these health-care workers. They have the courage to pursue their mission even when it might lead to their death. That sounds a lot like Jesus.

Compassion is what enables congregations to reach out during the midst of the crisis and contribute to food banks or create their own food kitchens. We can be in awe of congregations who practice mission even when they can’t worship in their church building.

Social distancing and self-quarantining can easily create loneliness. It is dangerous to physically embrace people outside our household. We can have compassion for each other by finding ways to stay in contact with others. We can call or text simply to see how others are doing.

Worship is even more important in this time of crisis. The churches were full on the Sundays after 9/11. On the day of 9/11, we sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” in chapel at seminary. We need to look for a power beyond ourselves, a power of goodness that lies at the heart of reality.

We especially need to worship when we are in isolation. When we cannot gather together for worship in the sanctuary, we gather together online. What it lacks in the physical sensation of actually sitting next to each other, it makes up for in revealing that God is still working in the midst of a crisis. God is calling to people to care for each other.

## **Conclusion**

We can choose how to respond to fear. Fear is a curse if it leads us to withdraw into ourselves. If we let fear control us, it will dominate our thinking.

Fear is charged with energy. It will be a blessing if it gives us the courage to look outside ourselves. We still have essential business to do during this plague. We can love God and love our neighbor.

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