

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Sermon Reflection Notes

Fear. It is something we all know a lot about. Fear is an interesting motivator. If you want to influence others, make them fearful of something. We see this often in politics; both parties ask a variation on 'what do you cherish about your life, and who will take that away?' or 'what are your highest ideals and who stands in the way of those aspirations becoming reality?'. Religion often uses fear, wrongly many would argue, to motivate people to behave 'correctly' in order to avoid hell. Walter Brueggemann said all people fall into 2 categories: those who fear the world they treasure is crumbling all around them, and those who fear the world they dream of will never come to be. Fear manipulates. Fear controls. Fear isolates.

Yet, our scripture this week is about love overcoming fear. The disciples were gathered together in a house behind locked doors because they felt their lives were in danger. The political and religious leaders of the time ruled with an iron fist, and all was going according to plan. Fear was keeping the disciples of Jesus in their place...quiet, afraid, alone. But then, in this locked room, Jesus mysteriously appeared. Jesus said to them: "Peace Be with You." Not just the pretense or façade of peace, actual peace. With them.

We often think the opposite of fear is courage, but you can act courageously and still be fearful. In fact, courage almost requires fear because without fear, courage isn't needed. The opposite of fear is instead, the absence of fear; the absence of fear is peace.

And with their newfound peace, Jesus sent the disciples out into the world to forgive sins. He breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." God raised Jesus from the dead for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus wanted the disciples to go, with new life--with the Holy Spirit, with peace--to forgive, to restore life and meaning in others.

The way of Jesus is the way of love and mercy and peace, and it is so much more powerful than fear.

This scripture is also known as the story of 'Doubting Thomas,' the one disciple who wasn't in the room with the others that day. Thomas doubted; he needed to see Jesus again for himself. He gets a bad rap for having questions, but everyone in the resurrection stories doubted. They all came to believe after questioning or running to see for themselves. There's nothing wrong with a little doubt. Doubt doesn't mean you have a failure of faith, it just means you've got good questions.

This story, Thomas' story as well as the rest of the disciples, is a story of an encounter with resurrection. Love and mercy, not fear, allow us to experience resurrection. Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit onto the disciples and to us. He offered peace, mercy, and love to them, and to us. And he's given us the power to share that with others. Can we share of ourselves in such a way that others may see the sacrificial love of God in us? Can we share with each other how we have experienced resurrection, how we've come to believe, how we have received peace when fear crept in?

Coercion, manipulation, isolation, fear...these are not the way of Jesus. May we all experience resurrection and the gift of life through mercy and love. May we share it with the world.

Scripture

John 20:19-31 (NRSVUE)

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Discussion Questions

1. What is fear and how/why does it hold so much power?
2. Easter proclaims that life is victorious over death. Death, however, in the New Testament is not about funerals and cemeteries. Death in the New Testament means that death is the power at loose in the world that wants to talk us out of our lives—not just when we are sick and old, but rather, death talks us out of joy, out of courage, out of freedom for the future. What are some tools 'death' uses to close us off from life? Where are places 'death' robs us of life even when we are still breathing?

3. (from the film *Conclave*) "...let me tell you that the one sin I have come to fear more than any other is certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. Even Christ was not certain at the end. He cried out in His agony at the ninth hour on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Our faith is a living thing precisely *because* it walks hand in hand with doubt. If there was only certainty, and if there was no doubt, there would be no mystery, and therefore no need for faith."
What do you think of this quote, particularly in relation to the story of doubting Thomas? Is certainty a sin? Does it vanquish unity and tolerance? Does a little doubt just mean we have good questions?
4. How did you come to believe?
5. Where/how have you experienced resurrection?

Closing Prayer

God, if I love thee for hope of heaven, deny me heaven. If I love thee for fear of hell, give me hell. But I love thee for thyself alone, give me thyself alone. Amen.

"But the greatest of these Love."