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Sermon 11 Apr 2021

Fear, Forgiveness & Faith

Your best friend just got murdered - executed, in fact. You could have helped him escape if he had wanted to, which you know he wouldn't, but instead, you ran. You're angry and disappointed, not only in yourself, but in your friend. He said he could handle it. He said he was big enough to avoid it. He said he was God.

Or at least, that's what you heard but maybe you misunderstood.

People know who you are. You were inseparable for years. You witnessed his "crimes" and you know you were an accomplice. You are thinking to yourself, "How am I going to get out of this? How am I going to get out of town?"

Your hopes have been dashed and a once bright future is now very dark indeed.

And you are scared.

Can you imagine what it would be like to be there with the disciples, to be them? The doors are locked. The room is dim. There is a low murmur of voices in the background as you sit in a corner and review for the hundredth time the contradictions, the injustices, and your own role in the horrible death of your best friend. They had seen the horrific treatment Jesus had received and they all knew that it could happen to them. Our imaginations have quite a lot to work with as we envision that room in John 20:19-31 on the evening of the day the disciples discovered that not only was their Master dead, but his body was now missing.

But I wonder, "What do you see in that room? What do you see after betrayal, after disappointment? What do you see "after"? I'll tell you what I see. I immediately see "Fear." It is very obvious and real – the disciples are scared of the Jews, according to John and the doors are locked. After disappointment and betrayal, there is fear.

Many of you know that, before we moved to Scotland, Pastor Steve and I had a farm. It wasn't a huge farm, but it was a full working farm. And on that farm, we had some chickens. And part of the evening chores on our farm was to lock up the chickens at night. You see, in rural South Carolina, we had predators that lurked in the night who would love to snack on our plump, no-soy, no-corn, organically fed hens. Coyotes (or as we locals called them "yotes", owls, racoons and possums. The chickens instinctively knew to go into their coops just as the sun began dipping beneath the trees – so we didn't have to round them up or anything. We just walked out to the coops once it was dark and they'd be all snug up on their roosts, cooing and sleeping soundly. So it was our job to lock the doors and make sure they were safe from the predators. And this wasn't a difficult job – except for the time that Steve and I began watching a TV show called "The Walking Dead" – the show about zombies – people who had died but kept on living. And let me tell you, walking out into the night, into the dark, into the back woods of our farm to lock the door of the chicken coop after watching an episode of Walking Dead was one of the scariest things you can imagine. Every shuffle, every pinecone falling to the ground, every hoot of the neighbourhood owl was a zombie's approach – or at least it sounded that way.

To think back on it, it's really pretty funny that we both we were so freaked out by that show and by walking out into the night to lock up our chickens. But true fear is not really funny at all. H.P. Lovecraft, a writer of weird and horror fiction said, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear," and fear makes you do things you would normally not do.

Fear even determines the price of gold. There is a factor in gold options known as the "Fear Index," invented by James Turk in the 1980's. "When the Fear Index is rising (which occurs when money is flowing into gold, pushing up its exchange rate and raising the market value of gold reserves), it's usually because people are worried about the dollar or the health of the banking system and are looking for alternative stores of value." Fear can make you take drastic measures. I'm sure you've read about – or even know some folks – who consider themselves "preppers" – people who are concerned about devastating world events. The kind of folks who build underground bunkers and stock them with food that will last 30 years, tanks of water and stores of toilet roll. We experienced some of that at the beginning of the pandemic when people were hoarding pasta and rice and toilet roll.

So where does FEAR come from? Each of us has felt afraid, and we can all recognize fear in animals – even our own pets. Yet there are varying levels of consensus among researchers of the phenomenon. But one thing is for certain: we know it when we feel it.

And boy did the disciples feel it.

Can't you just envision the disciples, pacing the room, worried about their future, paralyzed by fear, enveloped by failure, betrayal, confusion, disappointment, shame, and guilt? They had been with Jesus throughout his ministry, John tells us that they didn't truly understand his teachings, they had misinterpreted his miracles and had even been misdirected by their own cultures' assumptions about the immortality of the messiah. People recognized them as being part of Jesus' inner circle. They'd just watched as Jesus was accused, tried and convicted by an angry crowd of bullies. They watched as he was beaten, humiliated, and hung up to die. They are afraid – afraid of being locked up - afraid of being crucified themselves – and they're allowing the world, rather than the risen Jesus control their actions and attitudes.

It's easy to get caught up in fear and worry, isn't it? – especially with the year we've been through. So easy to feel that we can't go on – that it would be better just to lock the door and hide. And John tells us that's exactly what the disciples did.

John writes, "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked 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

Last week Pastor Steve shared with us how John was intentional in telling the reader that the Passover was near, or that it's 6 days to Passover - and John has a tendency to repeat himself when there's something he wants to get across to the reader – and he's done that here. As we said before, the disciples were in a state of fear, worry and anxiety but Jesus says to the disciples as he walks into the room, Peace be with you – not once, but twice. The word John uses is *eiréné* (i-ray'-nay) – that's a word we've mentioned before in our sermons, which means in one sense peace, quietness, rest – the absence of conflict -

And you can imagine seeing Jesus for the first time, yes, the disciples were overjoyed (they rejoiced) but they were probably feeling a bit guilty as well. They'd abandoned Jesus, Peter denied Jesus, they all ran away instead of standing by him in the most important moment of Jesus

ministry. And so Jesus says again eiréné (i-ray'-nay) – which in another sense means “wholeness” – the wholeness that comes when all essential parts are joined together – it refers to harmony and unity – it’s roughly equivalent to the Hebrew Shalom – the way things were before the fall. So not only is Jesus telling them to calm down, that they need not be afraid. He is also telling them that they are whole, restored, forgiven, regardless of what they did. Jesus forgives them for doubting, for betraying, for abandoning.

Jesus then says, “I am sending you as the Father sent me.” And John tells us “When he had said this, Jesus 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.”

Now notice that John tells us that Jesus breathed on them and they received the Holy Spirit just as in the Garden in Genesis God breathes into Adam and he becomes fully alive. This is another example of John’s connecting Jesus with the work of God in creation as we’ve been talking about for the last few weeks.

And here Jesus shows his forgiveness by empowering them to carry on the work that he himself had begun. Not only does he send them, enable them, but he authorizes them. He gives them his own authority. Jesus sends the disciples to continue his ministry and to preach the Gospel. Those that hear of Jesus through them, directly or indirectly, will have the opportunity to repent of their sins and receive God’s forgiveness.

And what happens next, verse 24

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin^[c]), 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.”

The gospel of John shows us that faith comes in different ways and with differing intensities to different people. In verse 8 of this same chapter, the beloved disciple believes upon seeing the empty tomb. In verse 16, Mary believes when the Lord calls her name. The disciples here in verse 20 actually see the risen Lord. And in verse 25, Thomas says that he must touch the wounds.

When I began thinking about this scripture, I tried to imagine how Thomas must have felt. How it would have been so easy for him to be reluctant to believe if we remember his words as Jesus prepared to go to Jerusalem after Lazarus’ death—“Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). Thomas has been zealous for Jesus, He saw the impending danger to his Lord, but he was ready to share his fate. It’s likely that Thomas had been brought up believing that the Messiah couldn’t die –like that crowd in chapter 12v34 who when Jesus spoke about his death, said “We have heard from the law that the Messiah^[f] remains forever. And now Thomas has seen his worst fears come to life. His beloved Jesus has truly died. The crucifixion must have broken his heart. Thomas believed, but his belief was betrayed. We can understand why he would be slow to believe again.

Before working in Largs, Steve and I were pastors in Glasgow at the Broomhill Community Church of the Nazarene. Steve was the associate pastor and I was the Community Outreach Pastor and my first line of duty as the Community Outreach Pastor was to reach out to the community. One of the ways we did that was by transforming the property around the church into a garden - a garden that would grow food that could be shared with neighbours, a place to sit and share stories, a place for children to learn about growing food and the abundance of God's kingdom. As Steve and I were working with volunteers one sunny spring Glasgow day, removing fences, building raised garden beds and covering the ground with cardboard and wood mulch an older gentleman shuffled over from the flats next to the church and began to tell me why this garden thing wasn't going to work... he said that the mulch would blow away, that since we removed the fences people would steal our garden beds and that rowdy guys from the bar across the street would damage the plants. He had his doubts and coincidentally his name was Tommy, our own doubting Thomas. It wouldn't work, he said, so you might as well not even try.

But we did try – we built the garden beds, filled them with good soil. We planted seeds and seedlings and garlic bulbs and even mustard seeds. Tommy would come by to see me once a week or so and he'd tell me why the garden wasn't going to work and that my heart was going to get broken by some cheeky kids wrecking the place.

But one day, in the mid Summer, Tommy stopped by and shared with us the story of when he was a kid and how he used to walk by a farmer's field on his way home and pull carrots, wash them in the stream and eat them – you could almost taste those carrots just by looking at the expression on his face as he remembered. That afternoon we planted carrots just for him. We learned a lot about Tommy that Summer. He shared stories about his childhood, his days in the military and how he met and fell in love with the most beautiful woman in the world.

One afternoon, I was working in the garden and Tommy walked up to me and smiled, "You've done it. You've really done it. I didn't think you could, but look at this garden!" Then he handed me a tenner and said, "Buy some dirt or seeds or something" and he smiled and winked at me.

Tommy, like Thomas, had to see it to believe it.

Now back to our scripture. The disciples, excited, uplifted, filled with the Holy Spirit, tell Thomas that they've seen Jesus and what does Thomas do? He makes an outrageous demand: "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". Thomas wanted proof. He wanted to see it with his own eyes before he would believe. And if I'm honest, I get that. I've been there. I think a lot of us have. That place where our faith has been shattered into a million pieces, that place where our hearts are broken by the world, hurt by people we love.

And what do we see happen? Jesus doesn't ridicule Thomas. He doesn't scold him or call him names for not believing. Jesus walks into the room – the one with the locked door and again, he says, "I bid you Peace". I bid you wholeness. I bid you restoration. He speaks directly to Thomas and says, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus doesn't condemn Thomas for doubting, like those who demanded signs and wonders before they would believe but instead, Jesus allows him see and feel – to get the proof he needed. Jesus invites Thomas to examine the truth, restoring his faith.

And then Jesus says "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus has just commissioned them to go and spread the good news - As the Father has sent me, so I send you. – and so what he's saying to Thomas is this – look, you've seen me and you've believed but there will be others who will want

proof, just as you did. It's your mission, it's your call to share the Gospel - to become the body of Christ for the world so that through you they can make contact with me.

And that's John's message to us today as the church, as the body of Christ. We are called to move beyond fear, to accept the gift of forgiveness through faith that Jesus offers to each one of us today as he offered his disciples in that locked room. We, you and I, are called to proclaim the good news, to be the hands and feet of Jesus to the world and to proclaim the good news of God's love and the forgiveness of sins. And I have no doubt that we will do just that. May God richly bless you this week as you live out that call.