

That They Might Have Faith

By: Keith Holste

May 1, 2011. "Fear not. Peace be with you." Pastor Keith preaches on Jesus' appearance to his disciples after his resurrection. They were hiding in fear — fear of the authorities, and fear of Jesus' response after they'd failed him. But instead, Jesus brought peace to his people. And today he sends us out to bring peace and forgiveness to the world.

*** Transcript ***

As we reflect on our gospel today, we begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Often when we are children, our response to fear is to hide. If we're fearful about something, we go and hide. And often this ends up being tragic in fires in homes, because if a fire breaks out, children go and hide because they're afraid of the fire. Then it becomes that much harder for the firefighters and other rescuers to find them. And we probably always remember those times when we were anticipating punishment of some kind because we'd done something wrong and we knew it, and so we went to hide under the bed, or hide in the closet, go to the far end of the house, go to the basement or whatever, so we wouldn't have to be confronted or be found by our parents. We wanted to avoid them, because we were afraid of what would happen.

In our gospel today, we hear of our disciples hidden in fear. It's after the crucifixion. It's after the resurrection. But they are fearful, and they go and hide in the house, behind locked doors, because they're fearful. There were the authorities to fear — they were identified with Jesus, and the last word they'd heard from the authorities is that Jesus had been crucified, and so they anticipated the same kind of reaction. They might not be crucified, but they'd be imprisoned at a minimum. And since they were cohorts with Jesus, some of his band, they were fearful of being arrested at least themselves. And of course, they hadn't really expected to see Jesus alive again after he died. He had told them on occasion, but they really didn't catch onto that. And by that first Easter evening, there were some reports that he'd been seen alive. But they still weren't so sure. So when Jesus is to enter the room, I'm sure they're afraid. What is this? This person who we saw die and was buried, now is alive in front of us? It would be a fearful kind of thing. It would be fearful for any of us if we went to someone's funeral and then saw them a few days later. So we can imagine just that thing of seeing someone alive who had been dead was a fear-causing thing.

They had other reasons to be fearful in his presence. Remember how they had acted in the run-up to his execution. They could expect Jesus, if he came in the room, to say something like, "You failed me." When the going got tough at the times, and the prayer in the garden, and the trials, and at the execution, most of the disciples fled. After Jesus was arrested they all fled, it says. John showed up at the cross. Maybe others of the disciples we don't know about. But when things were tough for Jesus, the disciples were generally not around him. Or they might have been afraid of Jesus coming in and saying something like this: "You left me, just as I told you you would." He could have reviewed with them all the predictions — that he would suffer and die and rise again — that he had given them ahead of time but they had ignored or not understood, and reminded Peter of how he had told him that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crowed. And Peter did that, and so he could have reminded Peter about that. So it's a different way of saying: you failed me. I told you these things that would happen, and you didn't believe me. On the more positive side, they might have expected Jesus to say something like, "I'll give you one more chance though." Because when they'd failed him before, he never fired

them as disciples. He kept working with them and teaching them. They might have expected now even one more show of grace from a forgiving master.

So the disciples were no doubt full of fear that first Easter evening. The authorities were after them. They had heard these strange reports of his resurrection and they were fearful of what he might say to them, how he would remind them of how they had failed him and not listened to him very well. But when Jesus enters the room, he says something different. He says, "Fear not. Peace be with you." In his presence they really had no reason to fear, he assures them. He dispels their fears about the authorities coming to get them. Instead, they will be empowered to go out as disciples, unafraid of what the authorities might do. The authorities will do things to them, but they will go out with a new attitude. They are bold. They are willing to do whatever they need to do for the sake of Jesus, unafraid of the authorities — because they know the mission. And their mandate for mission is so strong.

By saying "Fear not, peace be with you," Jesus dispelled also their fears about him. There was a forgiveness implied here. They could be at peace — for he came as their friend and teacher, not someone to punish them. By his words Jesus brought calm to them. He showed them himself so they could believe indeed he was risen. And so even if they were reacting in fear to the fact that he was a resurrected person, he put them at ease about that by showing them that indeed he was, but it was true what they've been hearing. It was true. He was raised and alive again. Twice, and then a third time the next week, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." Jesus brings peace to his people. His desire is that those who are with him will have peace. He wants them to have an inner peace of knowing that they are accepted and loved, by him and by God. He wants them to have the inner peace of knowing that everything is okay. They don't have to be fearful.

But we could also say when Jesus says "peace be with you" he's being the prayer for an external peace, we could call it — that is being at peace with people around them. Not just an inner peace, but a peace with the people around them. It is being able to forgive as they have been forgiven. It means living in harmony. When a person is not so self-centered, but being centered on living in Jesus, then there's an ability to live at peace with other people. And that peace is so important for Jesus to communicate to us.

After saying, "Fear not, and peace be with you," Jesus says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This was an empowering word as he was sending them out. This means that they go out now in the name of Jesus, in the risen Lord, but they go out with the power of the Spirit. Jesus before had wanted people to be quiet about him. He'd do miracles and he'd say don't tell anybody about this. But now his work is complete. He's done miracles. He's done teaching. He's died and he's risen. Now he wants everyone to see this whole story, and to see what he was about. So after the resurrection, there's this clear instruction to be sent and to go out with the message about Jesus.

Well it's a week later, and Thomas is with the disciples this time. He has found it hard during the week to grasp the reports that Jesus is alive. He's sensible, and he questions how can a man who has been dead come alive again? And he declares that he won't believe in the resurrection of Jesus unless he can see him with his own eyes and feel him with his own hands. We see Thomas in this gospel change right before our eyes. He goes from not believing, to seeing and touching Jesus, to believing and confessing to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" His believing made all the difference. He went from fear and skepticism to a full confession, and to then active mission work as a follower of Jesus. Thomas reminds us of how we all develop in faith to some degree.

There's a book entitled *Will Our Children Have Faith?* that tells about the stages of faith development

of young people. And it says that children go from kind of knowing God through their parents, and kind of believing with their parents, in their very young years and days as they kind of experience a faith with the parents, to being more in groups of people and on their own, being parts of youth groups and things like that, where they are associated with the church, but they're kind of differentiating their own faith at that point, to probably being a little older when they begin to ask real questions about the faith and about Jesus and what this means for them. It's kind of a third stage. And then the fourth and final stage is that they come to say, "Oh, this is my faith" — that after being skeptical, maybe asking hard questions, they come to believe in a certain way that's theirs, and it's not just parroting say their parents' faith, but they say, "This I truly believe. This is my Lord. This is my life."

Thomas models this pattern for us. Thomas followed the group as the disciples were going about with Jesus. Then when he missed the first announcement of Jesus' resurrection by Jesus, he didn't believe it. But when his questions were answered and he could come to believe, he openly confessed his faith in the risen Lord. And it's been pointed out that Thomas is the only one really who speaks a confession here. The other disciples are there and they kind of say yeah, we believe you're alive. But we don't really hear them say that. Thomas we hear quoted: "My Lord and my God!" He came to a faith that he lived by.

John writes, as we spoke of with the children, "These things are written that you come to believe, and believing, you may have life." Coming to this kind of belief makes a huge difference. It's a life-changing kind of experience. Belief can replace anxiety with peace. Belief can replace fear with confidence. And belief brings the ability to receive forgiveness and to forgive. In this rich passage Jesus says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." So all these things make huge differences for us. These words of Jesus after his resurrection give us a whole new perspective on life. We can be at peace with ourselves and at peace with one another. Jesus brings peace to us. We know we are one with him, and that means we can forgive others and be at peace with them. We can live with confidence rather than live with fear. We have confidence because we know the one that we believe in rose from the dead. Death couldn't even do him in. And so we too now have the promise of eternal life. We know that we can be fearless, because nothing can do us in eternally.

I think now of some of these interviews I've heard this last week of people who were struck by the terrible tornadoes in Alabama. And maybe you heard some of the interviews too. There were people saying, "I believed — even though my life was in danger and my child's life was in danger — I believed that no matter what would happen, on the other end I would be with God." And their belief in God carried them through this time, and they could be fearless in a sense, because they knew either way they would win. They would be with the Lord.

Believing in the resurrection brings meaning to life. Life isn't just being born and living and dying. Life has a purpose. Life has a mission. Jesus sends us out to bring peace and forgiveness to the world, and with this new life comes hope. Believing in him gives us a scheme in which to place our life, and to say my life does have meaning because I'm connected to Jesus, and I have a meaning for my life each day. We know that we're connected to something much bigger. It's not just me, what I do each day. I'm not just a little atom going around doing what I do. But whatever I do each day, I'm on a mission with and for Jesus. And I live so others may believe, and then when they believe, that they might have faith. And having faith, have life. We're not by ourselves. We are connected with many more who call themselves followers of Jesus, and we're on a mission with and for him. Because Jesus is risen, because we know about it, because we believe it, because we have a way to go now at life, we have a direction. We're on a mission that others might believe. And that they, believing, might have life as well. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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