

***Fear, Peace, Joy and Doubt***  
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church  
May 1, 2011  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

Text: **John 20:19-31**

NRSV

<sup>19</sup> 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." <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> 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."

<sup>26</sup> 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." <sup>27</sup> 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." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> 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."

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

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### The Sermon

If anyone present in worship this morning, or hearing this sermon via radio, or receiving this sermon via e-mail or other means has never experienced fear, I am sorry to have to tell you this but you have a problem my friend!

Fear -- when it is not just over-the-top-scared of anything and everything variety - is basic to human survival. What is known as the fright/flight instinct is innate within us, and is one of the reasons we humans are still living on this planet, although we seem to be becoming increasingly expert at placing human survival at risk.

Now if you should be one of those unfortunate people who is fearful all the time - especially if your fear is not grounded in legitimate cause for true anxiety, then you may either be one of those "Why Pray When You Can Worry" types I've spoken of previously, or you may need help with your phobic-reaction to life.

Sorting out what is truly worthy of our fear (which essentially boils down to whether or not we can actually do anything to alter our circumstances) has become increasingly difficult in this era of instant communication. It used to be we might well worry about whether our away from home for the first time son or daughter was making good and safe choices. Now we can get texted, tweeted, cell-phoned, skyped, or e-mailed confirmation that our anxiety is well-merited...., or not.

Further, if we tend to be paranoid about creeping socialism in our country we can get “socialism alerts” on the darndest things, or conversely threats for those on the opposite end of the religious/political continuum.

But our focus for today’s sermon is not on fear in general, nor is it even on fear that you or I may be feeling in particular, but rather on fear as it relates to faith, and especially faith lived out in a community of the faithful.

So, I ask:

- ▶ What so deeply concerns you at this point about your personal, your family, your friends, your church, your denomination, your society, your world, that you can’t seem to *get a grip* on what is worthy of fear?
- ▶ What in your fearfulness might be labeled *free-floating anxiety*?
- ▶ Are there aspects of your fear over which you have some control, and are you exercising your options in this regard?
- ▶ What do you have to admit is totally out of your control, so you might as well let go of it?

On the *macro*, i.e. large-scale, eternity-influencing scale we may be worrying about the state of our souls, or the souls of those we dearly love, or the state of our nation and world.

On the *micro*, i.e. down to the nitty gritty level, we may have wonderment, doubt, questions about whether God is or is not involved in things like pain, suffering, living when we want to, and dying when we are clearly beyond the bounds of any hope for further quality in life.

At least these are the heartfelt concerns I’m hearing from you, from those on whom I make pastoral calls, from those I meet with when a loved one has passed, and in so many other contexts as well.

Our Scripture text this morning from the Gospel of John, states that “the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked *for fear of the Jews.*”

Commentators on this passage indicate that it is unlikely that Jesus’ actual followers had to fear *the Jews* - but that by the time this Gospel was written Jews may indeed have been a threat to young Christians and young Christian faith communities.

Later in human history it was the Jews who needed to fear the Christians, as we are only too keenly aware on this Holocaust Remembrance Day 2011.

That the band of disciples and followers of Jesus would have been fear-filled following the death of their Master is fully understandable. The source of their fear was probably as diverse as their individual personalities and the roles they played in that rag-tag not-always very pious or faithful group who’d been traveling around the countryside with their hoped-for but now arrested and killed Messiah.

They had plenty of cause for fear, and sometimes we do too.

But then, in John’s version of the Resurrection story, the very one whose death they’d been grieving appears in their midst. This group had been told by a couple of female followers that the Risen Christ had appeared to them, and their heads were still spinning from their account when, lo and behold, there Jesus stood.

Still recognizable as the Crucified One, but no longer bound by space and time and locked doors.

I've officiated at funerals and memorial services where unexplainable things happen. On such occasions I've been known to use the name of the deceased and say "Stop that!" - which typically elicits a laugh among the gathered mourners. So far at least, however, no funeral or memorial service has featured the actual return of the deceased from the realm of death. Rather, we get hints that death and life may not be as nailed down and as *temporal* or as *final* as we are inclined to think they are.

To continue with our text, there is Jesus, still showing the effects of the human hell he's been through, but not so human as to be able to resume business as usual.

Angelic visitations in biblical narratives tend to begin with the words, "Be not afraid!", to which I'm inclined to think that had it been me experiencing this I'd say to myself, "Right. I'm perfectly calm, yes I am, yes I am" - followed by - "I'm not calm at all, no I'm not, no I'm not!"

Jesus goes beyond saying simply or complexly "Be not afraid!" He uses the language of total well-being, of perfect peace, namely "*Shalom be with you.*"

He doesn't try to talk them out of feeling or believing that their situation is dire, he doesn't promise he's there like he used to be present with them, he offers them "Peace! Perfect peace!"

Peace, Shalom, because of their circumstance. Peace, Shalom in spite of their circum-stance. Simply, profoundly "PEACE."

I have the sense that whomever the Evangelist we know as John was deeply involved in a faith community that knew a lot about the *Shalom* resulting from faith in Jesus. But helikely also knew that "shalom" was perhaps the most perilous and fragile of all conditions

"Peace be with you."

So important to Jesus, so important to John, that John has Jesus repeating it twice.

How can you -- how can I -- how can we move from fear to peace?

How can - can we - we experience true Shalom?

**By trusting the *source*.**

The gathered disciples and followers trusted the source of those words, and we are told that this enabled them to move from fear to joy.

Intriguingly, in the realm of human emotions, such transitions don't tend to come from getting everything we want.

Diagnoses don't always change.

Frailty often persists.

Human structures - including religious buildings and human faith communities - wax and wane.

Peace, however. Only seems to come when there is resolution, whatever shape that takes.

Death can be very freeing to the suffering ones, and to those who have suffered with them.

Divorce can be freeing, painful and disruptive as it typically is.

Termination of a job, a lifestyle, a struggle to fix the unfixable, or a myriad other things, can lead - usually not instantly, but hopefully eventually - to new layers of self and human understanding and acceptance.

So, in the biblical story the disciples fear was assuaged by Jesus' presence and offer of Shalom. Indeed, we are told they weren't just *happy*. They were *filled with joy* - elated in other words.

At the same time, that's not the end of the story, is it?

The Disciple named Thomas wasn't there to experience all this.

Dear Thomas.

Doubting Thomas.

Human - oh so human - Thomas.

Thank God for Thomas.

Thomas had the courage of his convictions.

His convictions had kept him "on the road" with Jesus no matter how much he wanted to protect his beloved master from the fate that awaited him in Jerusalem.

His conviction had kept him in the community of disciples after Jesus' crucifixion could have caused him to bolt.

Now, in spite of his doubts, he is open to having his doubts alleviated, but when he experienced what the others had.

So he remained, and so the story goes, Jesus honored his remaining, respected Thomas' special ways of reaching closure, and without hesitation Thomas could kneel in humble faith and say, "My Lord and my God."

Every organization, every congregation, every family needs its Thomases.

Gung ho is good, but it can lead to disastrous and impulsive choices.

Skepticism is good, if there is an openness to evidence not yet seen or experienced.

In this wonderful story from John's Gospel we have the blend of human reality.

We are fear-filled at times.

We are in wonder at times.

We do hopefully and prayerfully feel peace at times.

We do doubt at times.

But if we are willing to remain together, to worship together, to pray together, to work together, to cry together, to hold on to each other, to challenge each other, we can move out from behind the doors we lock out of fear, and be agents of transformation in a world so clearly in need of hope and joy.

Thanks be to God.