

*The Church of the Transfiguration*  
**A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter**  
**March 30, 2008**  
**John 20:19-31**  
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*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."*

Today we hear the grand finale of John's gospel message. It is still Easter Sunday, in the evening, when it is getting more difficult to see. Darkness is coming, the shadows are getting longer, and the fear of Good Friday is more palpable than the mystery of resurrection.

Which is more real? Faith? Or Fear? What helps the disciples choose? And how do we choose?

John's gospel gives us three stories of the resurrection – each filled with mystery, fear, and elements of the supernatural. How can mature faith come out of these ingredients?

We have first the story of Peter and the empty tomb – he and the Beloved Disciple discover only grave cloths left behind. It is the unnamed "Disciple Whom Jesus Loves" who sees this and believes. But we are not told what it is he believes. Peter, according to John, sees, yet does not understand.

Later, Mary Magdalene looks into the tomb – again, empty except for two mysterious angels in white. She tearfully assumes that someone stole the body, and she can't see her way through the grief. She then mistakes him for the gardener and turns toward Jesus twice before she cries out with recognition, "Rabboni!" She sees, but does not yet understand what to make of his strange appearance. Why was he unrecognizable at first? And why does he tell her not to cling to him? What does he mean? He is the same, yet changed. She still does not understand.

We have here a confused and very fearful community. They are still in Jerusalem, where hours before crowds of their own people were screaming for Jesus' crucifixion and wondering if Peter was one of his followers. They shut the doors to barricade themselves away from what they fear. And John tells us they were afraid of the Jews.

Just to be sure that we don't miss this point. John's Gospel tells us 5 different times that the disciples were afraid of the Jews. He wants us to understand something important. Unfortunately, in the long history of Christianity, we have mostly misunderstood a key piece of this Gospel, causing a very ancient anti-Semitism to fester and remain in the dark – unhealed, misunderstood and feared.

We need to try and understand what was in the mind of John when he wrote these troubling words. Because for John, and the Johannine community around him in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, fear and faith were inextricably intertwined.

We are told that, “In the beginning” the Word became flesh and that through him all things were made. In him, in Jesus, was life and light. This light shines in the darkness of fear, but fear does not understand it. The lack of understanding and the fear it instills causes many of his own disciples to abandon him. His friends anxiously whisper about him. What is it this man teaches? What do the healings mean? No one dares put words to what they instinctively know is true for fear of the Jews. What is it exactly that they are afraid of?

We are told that both the parents of the blind man and the Pharisees are all afraid to speak the truth about Jesus because they will be thrown out of the synagogue. We learn that the Jewish authorities have the power to exclude the faithful from their place of worship for voicing what they believe to be true – because their belief confronts and questions the faith of their fathers and mothers. There is a change in the wind of faith and fear swirls menacingly around Jerusalem.

At the time John’s Gospel is being written the people who boldly pray in the name of Jesus – who are courageous enough to say who they believe Jesus is – are thrown out of the synagogue and shunned. In the year 70, at a special council in Jamnia after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish authorities make an historic decision. They excommunicate all the Johannine Christians from the synagogue, forcing them to choose between Judaism or following the way of their Jewish leader Jesus.

When John writes that “they were afraid of the Jews” he is naming the fear that has consumed the community since Jesus was condemned to die. They are being shunned, excommunicated and put to death because what they believe threatens the faith of their own religious family. It is a family feud over how to interpret the truth.

Biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders writes in her book on John, *Written that You May Believe*, that it was these historical Jewish authorities “*in the life of Jesus and of the community who were personified by the evangelist in the collective person of ‘the Jews’ in the Gospel.*” (76) But there is more. What horrifies the faithful Jewish leaders is what the confused and frightened disciples finally start saying about Jesus. And it is Thomas who says it first.

The doors are locked for fear of the Jews and Jesus suddenly appears among them. He says twice, Peace be with you, and he shows them his wounds. The disciples don’t understand what they have seen. They tell Thomas that they have seen the Lord. They have yet to comprehend what seeing him means.

Thomas is no fool. He thinks they have seen an apparition – a ghost. He doubts because he is human and is trying to be calm and logical. They must all be crazy with grief. He

wants to see for himself and actually touch his teacher before he will allow himself to believe he is alive.

Eight days later, or one week from Easter morning, which is today, Jesus appears in the locked room again. This time Thomas is there. Jesus again says, Peace be with you. Then, in an intimate moment, he looks directly at 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."*

Thomas answers him with the supreme Christological pronouncement of John's Gospel, "*My Lord and my God!*" It is the truth of the resurrection. All that Jesus said and did in his lifetime were signs pointing to the nature of his being. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the final sign. It is not a resuscitated Jesus who is alive again, but an entirely new form of life. Because of Thomas' insistence that he see more evidence before he can believe, Jesus comes to him and gives him more than he asked for. Contrary to popular understanding, Thomas never actually touches Jesus. He sees, and believes, and proclaims him to be God.

Thomas' words "*My Lord and my God*" are spoken on behalf of the entire Christian community. They are the last words spoken by a disciple in the Fourth Gospel and are meant to have a covenantal aspect. It is these words which invite us to look again at what Jesus says in the midst of his friends, behind doors shut tight against their powerful fears.

***Peace be with you.*** He has said this before. At the Last Supper, when he was predicting his death, he said pointedly,

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.*

*I do not give to you as the world gives.*

*Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

*You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.'*" (John 14:27-28)

*"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.*

*In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me;*

*because I live, you also will live.*

*On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you".*

(John 14:18-20)

This is what Thomas realizes as he gazes on the wounded risen Christ before his eyes. It's not the wounds, but the memory of Jesus' promise that penetrates his fear. It is an "Aha!" moment that allows everything to fall into place. All the mystery of Jesus' strange yet familiar post-resurrection presence coincides with the realization of who he really is. He is the man they remember, yet he is changed. This is what he promised them would happen. But who, in their right mind could believe such a thing was possible?

What finally moves us all from fear to faith is a profound shifting of the ground we walk on. We remember with clarity that everything was leading up to this moment. We see

with new eyes that the moments in our lives are all connected. We are just a tiny piece of God's miraculous creation.

John the Evangelist wants us to remember that the entire Gospel leads up to this moment – every healing, every word spoken, every unresolved issue. There is no need to fear what lives in the world if we are living our lives dependent on a God of Love. It is only love that can conquer fear and replace it with the faith of a newborn.

This is the day, in the darkness of a room filled with fear when the disciples finally understand that Jesus is in the Father, and they are in Jesus, and he is in them. When he breathes on them he blows new life into them, just as God breathed the breath of life into the first human 'Adam', and blew a living spirit into Ezekiel's dry bones. This Holy Breath of God is now what sustains them, advocates for them, and draws them together in community.

The disciples are to go out from the dark, closed room, into the light of day and fear no more. The Holy Spirit within them is now breathing the truth of Jesus into their DNA, and they will never be the same again. It is through forgiveness, not fear, that people are attracted to the light of God. Jesus warns them, 'Retaining the sins of any they are retained' to remind them to stay in the light of truth and not get pulled into the darkness of fear. Retaining sin is to let someone else's fear persuade you to doubt what you know to be true. Let their fear go, turn the other cheek, know who you are and what you bring to God's world. We are reborn through the risen Christ to be children of the light, sent to bring love, forgiveness and truth into the world.

Let the Peace of Christ be always with you. Amen