

“What to Do with Our Fears”
John 20:19-31
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
April 23, 2017

We live in a time of much fear and it is not all unfounded. We fear terrorism and gun violence, both of which have become far too prevalent. We fear people who are different from us in terms of race, nationality and religion. We fear for our children’s safety, so much so that we often function in counterproductive ways, avoiding conversations that might make our children safer. We fear many things.

And we respond to our fears in many ways. One popular response is denial. Though everyone around us knows we are afraid, we insist that we are not, like characters in a horror film. But fear is a natural emotional response that cannot be denied. In the film *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke Skywalker insists that he is ready to confront the Dark Side of the Force. “I’m not afraid,” he says, to which Yoda replies, “You will be. You... will... be...” Denial doesn’t really work.

Another popular response to fear, especially for those of us with a y chromosome, is anger. Anger is the go-to emotion for men who struggle with many other emotions. Richard Rohr insists that one thing his extensive work with men’s groups has taught him is that most male anger is a cover for deep sadness. It’s just so much more comfortable for guys to express. So, when we grieve a painful loss or regret a personal failure or fear some threat to our safety or worth, we would much rather express anger toward someone or something than the deep sadness, guilt or fear we feel. But anger doesn’t really work either.

So, this leaves the more direct response of retreat or hiding. We seek refuge from the things that terrify us. We wall ourselves off from what frightens us. And this response has its place. The film *Hotel Rwanda* documents the refuge many found in a hotel during the Rwandan genocide of 1994 which claimed nearly a million lives. Over 1,000 people found refuge due to the courage of one hotel manager. When confronting such threats, seeking refuge only makes sense. And

yet, even this response only works for a time. The powers that threaten us do not give up easily. Other help is needed.

So, what are we supposed to do with our fears? If we can only deny them for so long, anger functions as just another kind of avoidance, and we cannot hide forever, what do we do? Perhaps we can find some help from the biblical witness. For time and again in scripture, faithful people find themselves in terrifying situations. In many ways, they respond just like us, because they are human, just like us, but somehow, they find help along the way and get through.

This is the case in the story we have read from John 20. It is the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. Mary Magdalene has discovered the empty tomb and run to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple. They have confirmed that the tomb is empty and made some movement toward belief, and Mary has talked with the Risen Christ, but it all seems unreal; and even if it is true, even if he is alive, they don't know what it means. All they know is that Jesus has been put to death by people who may come looking for them. So, they lock themselves away in fear. They are following the third path I have named.

John says they fear "the Jews" which is his way of referring to certain Jewish leaders who have played a role in Jesus' death. He does not mean all Jews. The disciples are all Jewish, as is Jesus. Most of us know this. It just feels like something we need to be clear about, especially today, on Yom Ha Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

But if the disciples have any sense, they fear the Romans more. They are the ones with the power. And they have other fears as well. They are afraid Jesus is dead and thus they are now alone and in danger. But they are also afraid he is alive. For if he is, how do they face him? They have deserted him in his hour of need. And what will he be like? Most of us don't talk to people who have died and they certainly don't talk back. There is something a bit creepy about the best-case scenario here. John says the disciples are locked away in fear. Indeed, they are and for good reason, many good reasons.

And before going any further, let's pause and affirm a couple of things about the disciples. First, they are together. They are not alone.

In times of great fear, we sometimes have a tendency to isolate ourselves. But we need each other in such times; we need community always, but especially in fearful times. Second, they are responding in a way that makes sense to them. They are afraid and they do have things to fear. So, locking themselves away, hiding, makes sense.

But only so much sense. The authorities can break down the door and the Risen Christ can walk right through it. So, they only have the illusion of safety and refuge. They need something more. And thankfully Jesus provides it.

There are a number of things he does in this story, many ways he helps the early disciples confront their fears, but the very first thing he does is show up. John says that as the disciples are locked away in fear, suddenly Jesus stands among them. He speaks a word of peace, three times, as a matter of fact; he breathes the Spirit upon them; and he calls them to the work of forgiveness. We'll get to all of that.

And in the narrative, there is a fascinating subplot about Thomas, which has been misinterpreted for 2,000 years. Thomas is no different from anyone else. No one believes in the Risen Christ until they see him. Thomas just isn't there with the others on the day of resurrection.

Anyway, before all of this, Jesus offers fearful disciples something much more basic – himself. He just shows up. This happens over and over again in the Gospels. Whatever else Jesus offers people in need, he offers his companionship. He does not avoid fearful situations, but rather moves toward them and offers comfort by being present.

Where is Jesus when a storm hits Lake Galilee? On the boat with his disciples, ready to go down with them. Where does Jesus go when Lazarus is dying? To Bethany, where Lazarus is, near Jerusalem, where danger lies, because he is needed there. The disciples question his decision, all but Thomas, the one whose faith many disparage. He is the one who says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him (John 11:16)."

Thomas is a person of faith, though at times in a resigned, underwhelming sort of way. One scholar says that when she hears Thomas speak, she imagines the voice of Eeyore (Jaime Clark-Soles). I get that. Let us also go, that we may die with him.

Anyway, the point is - Jesus does not avoid danger, but rather is always willing to move toward it and be present where he is needed. Even when it comes time for the cross, he shows up. So, it comes as no surprise that when the disciples tremble in fear, he is there. Thus, when we are afraid, one thing we know – Christ is present with us. The object of our fears may or may not go away. But we will not face them alone.

Once Jesus shows up, the first thing he does is say, “Peace be with you.” This may not sound like much, but it is. He’s not just saying, “Calm down,” or “Don’t worry.” The Hebrew word *Shalom*, usually translated as “peace”, means more than any English word can convey. It refers to an array of qualities including wholeness, completeness and an inner sense of contentment that no outer reality can take away. It is not just the absence of conflict and fear. It is the presence of wellbeing.

So, when Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” and he says it twice to this gathering of disciples and a third time a week later, when Thomas is present, he doesn’t mean, “Don’t be afraid,” but rather, “Be content in the fullest way,” and he helps them to do that by being present and by breathing the Holy Spirit upon them, so that a part of him will be with them always. So, even if they cannot make sense of everything, and even if they have reason to fear – neither the Jewish leaders nor the Roman Empire will be thrilled about Jesus’ followers any time soon – they can experience an inner sense of peace because they are not alone.

We too can experience this kind of peace in the midst of fearful circumstances. It’s the peace we sense going into surgery even though we have no guarantee that things will be alright. It’s the peace we experience around the time of death for a loved one. It’s the peace that overcomes us in the midst of our struggle with a difficult decision. In short, it’s the peace we cannot explain because it doesn’t make sense and it depends upon not us, but the Spirit who lives within us. Jesus wishes peace for all of his disciples struggling with fearful things, and he breathes the Spirit upon us to help us experience it.

So, Jesus shows up and offers fearful disciples the gift of peace; and then, he gives them work to do. Specifically, he says, “If you

forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Jesus calls these fearful disciples to shift their focus from self-concern to kingdom-concern, to quit worrying about their own safety and start worrying about the salvation of the world. In the process, he helps them deal with their fear, because you can’t be consumed by fear if you are consumed by service.

It’s a principle that shapes athletic endeavors. We can’t be worried about failure or injury if we are focused on effort and energy. It’s the same principle that shapes the Lamaze approach to childbirth, which I have no right to talk about as a man, except for the fact that I used the technique while having a piece of metal cut out of my foot without the benefit of anesthetics. We breathe in a certain way, but we also establish a clear focus of attention while we breathe. The brain can only have one primary focus. So, we make sure the focus is not on our pain.

Jesus calls the disciples to a ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation because it is desperately needed, but in the process, they forget about their concerns. The implication for us is that one way to lessen our fear is to be about the work God has called us to. A character in *The Shawshank Redemption* says, “Get busy living or get busy dying.” We can only do one or the other. In like manner, we can get busy serving or get busy worrying. Jesus calls us to life and service.

In the film *Boycott*, which documents the 1955 Montgomery Boycott, there is a scene in which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. watches local civil rights leader E. D. Nixon’s house burn to the ground after white supremacists have set it on fire and white firefighters lean on their trucks and watch it burn. Nixon asks King how he can stick to nonviolent principles while homes are being burned and people are being beaten and killed. He responds by speaking very slowly these words from Hebrews 10:39, “But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.”

It is but one of many signs of how grounded in faith Dr. King was and it is an illustration of how we can confront our fear. As people of faith, we are always about the work, God’s work. This doesn’t mean we take risks recklessly. Nor does it mean we have no fear. It means that

fear does not hold us back, it does not prevent us from pursuing our calling. In fact, our calling enables us to move beyond our fears.

Such a calling is what enabled our mission partners, Sam and Melody Harrell, to address a need in Kenya somewhat like the one in Rwanda that *Hotel Rwanda* documents. Following the Kenyan election on December 27, 2007, president Mwai Kibaki claimed that he defeated the challenger Raila Odinga, and all you know what broke loose. There was violence between political groups and tribes. So, the Harrells set up their own Hotel Kenya, providing refuge for many in danger. They took many risks in doing so, but they could not refuse to help in a situation like that, and as they helped, fear got lost along the way.

Thus, we are wise to go about our work - welcoming strangers, serving the poor, building relationships with people of other faiths. Are there risks involved? Sure. But we hardly notice them once we are taking a meal to Welcome House, swinging a hammer at a Habitat build or taking part in prayer at the synagogue or mosque. We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. He was speaking near the end of the Great Depression and in the lull between world wars. There was much to fear, but his point was that we could overcome those realities as long as we didn't allow fear to consume us. And he was primarily depending on the intrinsic strength of this nation, our inner character.

From the perspective of our faith, we would agree with FDR about the fears we face in this time, but our confidence is based not just upon American ingenuity and resourcefulness; it's based upon the goodness of God and the gifts of the Risen Christ. We not only have our own inner strength. We have a Christ who shows up in our time of need; a Spirit who is with us always, enabling us to experience inner peace even in the midst of turmoil; and a God who calls us to get busy about the work of healing and forgiveness wherein we lose ourselves and our fear. That's a far better set of strategies than those of denial, anger and retreat.