

**“Moving Past Our Fear”**  
**John 20:19-29**  
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A pastoral colleague in Richmond, Virginia developed a practice when his children were young that stirred fear in their hearts and one day caused a scene in church. He had them sit near the front of the sanctuary to encourage good behavior, and if he noticed anything inappropriate, he communicated to them in code while he was preaching. One finger placed on the temple meant they would get a talking-to when the family got home. Two fingers meant they would get more than a talking-to.

It seemed to work as a primitive approach to behavior modification until one Sunday in mid-summer when it was a hundred degrees and the air conditioning wasn't working. The pastor had sweat pouring down his face and so, without thinking about his code, he took his hand and wiped the sweat away, at which point both of his children burst into tears! They knew what two fingers meant. What might a whole hand mean? The pastor had to explain to the church what had happened.

Fortunately, other than a few pastors' children and probably a few parishioners' children too, most of us in this culture have not been accustomed to feeling fear in the church, but things are starting to change with the shootings that have happened in various worship contexts. And in other parts of the world, fear is a daily reality.

The terrorism in Sri Lanka is just the latest in a long line of violence that has taken place in worship contexts, and it is not just Christians who have suffered. Muslims in New Zealand and this country too, Jews in Pittsburgh and many other places; people of just about any faith have been targeted. And in places like Pakistan the threat is not restricted to isolated acts of terror. Christians are persecuted on a regular basis, and thus have reason to live in a constant state of fear.

Yet while the details of this contemporary resurgence of violence are new, the basic realities are not. Human beings have a long history of violence connected to religion as Mark Twain notes in his witty way.

Man is the Religious Animal. He is the only Religious Animal. He is only animal that has the True Religion – several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself, and cuts his throat if his theology isn't straight. He has made a graveyard of the globe by trying his honest best to smooth his brother's path to happiness and heaven. He was at it in the time of the Caesars, he was at it in Mahomet's time, he was at it in the time of the Inquisition, he was at it in France a couple of centuries, he was at it in England in Mary's day, he has been at it ever since he first saw the light... The higher animals (animals) have no religion. And we are told that they are going to be left out in the Hereafter... It seems questionable taste (*Letters from the Earth*, pp. 179-180).

Or consider this sobering description of what Christian Crusaders did in Jerusalem in the summer of 1099 (*The Crusaders in the Holy Land*, Meron Benvenisti, p. 38).

The Crusaders, drunk with victory conducted a massacre in the city such as has seldom been paralleled in the history of war; the troops ran amok through the streets, stabbing and slaying everyone they encountered... The Jewish community, gathered in the central synagogue, were shut in by the Crusaders and burnt alive... The massacre aroused horror among the Crusaders themselves...

A lot of violence has been done in the name of religion to religious people, thus inspiring a great deal of fear.

This is where we find Jesus' disciples on the evening of the resurrection in today's Gospel reading. John says, "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..." Mary Magdalene has found the tomb empty, encountered angels and talked with the Risen Christ himself. We might think all is well at this point. It is not. By nightfall, everyone is locked away in fear. Why? Because they are not yet sure what it means that Jesus is alive, because their

memories of his brutal death on a cross are still fresh, and because they too might be at risk, given that they are his followers.

John says it is “the Jews” they are afraid of, but this term needs a little unpacking. All of Jesus’ followers are Jews at this point, as is Jesus. So, clearly not all Jewish people are to be feared. Most likely John is referring to certain Jewish leaders who oppose Jesus and he is writing later than the other Gospel writers, in a time when the Church is beginning to break away from Judaism and thus there is tension between the faiths. This tension may be reflected in John’s terminology.

It may seem odd to us that some Jewish people would threaten other Jewish people, but only if we are unaware of Christian history. In England alone, there were centuries of persecution back and forth between Protestants and Catholics, as even the noble Thomas More, defender of piety when Henry VIII wanted an annulment of his marriage with Catherine of Aragon, was responsible for the violent deaths of many Protestants. There is a long history of Christians killing other Christians. We have no room to ridicule Jews or anyone else.

But in this instance, it’s not just that John is only referring to certain Jewish people who are not that different from certain Christian people. These Jews are really not the ones to fear most. The Romans put Jesus to death. Certain Jewish leaders played a role in getting the Romans to do so - and that would be the fear here, that like-minded Jewish opponents would turn the disciples in to Roman authorities – but the Romans present by far the greatest danger.

So, the fear is justified, but it’s not just a religious fear – of “the Jews.” It’s fear with social and political attachments – the Romans. But such is often the case. Religion is part of the story but not the whole story. Consider the conflict in Sudan which ended in two nations – Sudan and South Sudan. Many characterized this as religious conflict – Christian/Muslim – but it was mostly ethnic conflict, and as is the case with all wars, things like ego and power were part of the equation too.

So, the disciples are locked away in fear, much like many believers in any time, including ours. What happens to get them past their fear and thus, what might we learn from them as we live in an increasingly

hostile world? Well, what happens is that Jesus shows up. It's really as simple as that, but we might add that he shows up saying, "Peace be with you," over and over again. And in the end, this is enough to enable these early believers to get past their fear and live in faith.

Jesus does not bring any weaponry to guarantee their safety. He doesn't reveal any special powers like the Fantastic Four. He doesn't even promise that no one will harm them. In fact, many of them will die for their faith. But still his presence and *something* he brings enables them to get past their fear and offer the kind of witness we see in Acts 5, as they defy the authorities' insistence that they quit talking about Jesus.

What is this *something*? In part, it is the word of peace, shalom, the deep-down awareness that all will be well, no matter what the circumstances of life are, because this life is not all there is. In part, it is the fact the Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them; they will never be alone again. But most of all, it's just him; they trust in him.

The message for us is that this is how we get past our fears – not by making sure we have all the weaponry needed to defend ourselves, but by claiming Christ's gift of peace, by recognizing the presence of the Spirit in our lives, and by trusting in Jesus no matter what. There are no guarantees of safety. There is only the promise that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ, not even death itself. But this is enough.

Now, I say this realizing that most of us hedge our bets. We trust God but acquire a little protection too. I think of the snake-handling pastor Bill Leonard had talk to his classes at Wake Forest University. After his lecture, a student asked if he'd ever been bitten by a poisonous snake. "Many times," he replied. "What did you do?" the student asked. "Well," said the pastor, "If my faith was strong that day, I prayed. If it wasn't strong, I dialed 911."

It was an honest answer and one that reflects our posture on many issues. We trust in God but sometimes our trust falters and we may wonder if there aren't things we should do even if we trust in God. We place our lives in God's hands but still seek medical attention when we are ill. Why shouldn't we address other fears appropriately?

And we should. It's just that this isn't the way we get past fear, because no matter how many steps we take to defend ourselves from all

harm, it will never be enough in reality or in our minds. The only solution is to place our trust in the One who holds our lives in love, to accept the gift of peace that calms us deep down no matter what.

But Jesus not only brings fearful disciples the gift of peace; he sends them into the world to share this gift. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This is our calling in this world of so much fear – to spread peace everywhere we go.

The question is – how do we do this? Not without experiencing peace ourselves. We cannot share what we do not have. We cannot live in fear and bring anything other than fear into the lives of others. We have to be at peace with ourselves and God in order to spread peace.

1 John 4:18 puts it this way. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” Perfect love casts out fear. That’s the kind of love we know in Christ.

So, we begin by accepting the love God offers in Christ which enables us to move past our fear and experience peace. Then, we do the little things that make for peace every day, especially as we relate to people who are different from us, including people of other faiths. We tend to think of peacemaking as either a global enterprise that only national leaders can pursue or some kind of flaky habit of carryovers from the 1960’s. National leaders can make a difference and I always thought that peace was a good thing and that participating in public life was an American ideal, not something for which to apologize.

But the truth is there are little things each of us can do to advance the cause of peace every day that don’t require being in office or joining a protest – offering a warm smile to someone who usually gets hateful looks, offering a kind word to someone who is having a bad day, taking the initiative to get to know someone who is different from us, listening to a different opinion in an effort to understand not only what someone else believes but why, refusing to dump our anger on others, letting someone in line in front of us when they have just a few items or seem exhausted. There are so many things we can do that make a difference and that cost us nothing. These are things that make for peace.

In the way of something more organized, I think of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, some of whose leaders we met several years ago at the end of a Common Text Study we did with Temple Beth Or. It is a group made up of Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders who facilitate relationships between Israelis and Palestinians. Their focus is on education and bringing together youth of all faiths across all differences in Israel to build relationships, to enable young people to get past the caricatures and get to know each other. “We’re not about the political issues,” they say, “Pray God one day they will be resolved. But even when they are, real flesh-and-blood people will have to get along. They can only do that if they know each other.”

It just makes sense and we have been about this kind of work in interfaith studies and Habitat builds, in multicultural work and in many other ways. We have been about the work of peacemaking as a church. “As God has sent me, so I send you,” Jesus says, and so we go in peace, moving past our fear and helping others to do the same.

As many of you know, Dana and I have had two German Shepherds for almost all of our thirty-two years of marriage. We try to stagger the ages so that we don’t experience grief too often, we have one male and one female, and though the breed has clear standards, each Shepherd has his/her own personality.

The male we have now, Tusker, is a sturdy-looking male who might make your heart stop at our front door, but he is afraid of the world; he balks often on walks for no apparent reason. We think this may be tied to an experience he had as a puppy when an owl swooped near him, but for whatever reason he is fearful. Our current female, Rika, is afraid of nothing - except for laundry baskets and vacuum cleaners – she would take on a city bus and assume she could win.

They are an interesting twosome, but it seems to me that a wise approach to life falls somewhere in between these two personalities. There are things in this world to be afraid of, but being immobilized by fear is not helpful. Christ offers us the gift of peace so that we can move past our fear and engage the important concerns we must. Then, Christ promises to be with us every step of the way. Surely this is enough.