

“Emerging from Places of Fear: Becoming Bold Christians”

April 23, 2017

John 20:19-31

As we move from Easter Sunday, we began the next fifty days taking a deeper look into how we, as followers of Christ, came to be. We will look at the beginnings of the church with the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So between now and June 4th (Pentecost Sunday) we will take a look at the stories after the Resurrection. Stories like Jesus appearing post-resurrection; stories of the first resurrection believers; stories of how they moved from being paralyzed by fear to boldly going into the world with the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, in many ways the season of Easter is a way we, as the church, also celebrates the beginnings of missions. We find missions early on in the Resurrection passages of Scripture.

*Remember in Matthew... the two Mary's went to the tomb looking to care for a dead body, yet when they arrived they found an empty tomb. An angel greeted them and *instructed them to run and tell the others* so that they too might believe.

*Remember in Luke... a few of the disciples were walking along to the town of Emmaus. A strange man joined them on the walk. They talked, he listened. He talked, they listened. They sat together at the table. He took bread, blessed it and

broke it and their eyes were opened. The risen Lord had been with them the whole time. Then he urged them to go and tell so the others would believe.

*Remember in John... the disciples had gathered behind locked doors very much afraid. Like hostages trapped by impending doom. They must have been afraid that the authorities would gather them up next. Fear of being crucified was looming over them. But, then Jesus comes to them, shows them his scars and they rejoice. Then, Jesus said to them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Go. Tell. Send.

It sounds easy enough. But, not so easy for Thomas. It seems that Thomas was elsewhere when Jesus came to them the first time. When he left them, fear was strong; but when he returned something had changed. They told Thomas whom they had seen. He did not believe them. And, why should he? All the events of the week before were indeed real. For all they had endured, the arrest, the trial, the confusion, the fear, the taunting, the gruesome crucifixion---those were too horrible, the pain too deep. There was no doubt that all of that had happened. He had seen it with his own eyes. So, why after all that, would the disciples say Jesus was still alive? Why the sudden change? They insisted they had not only seen Jesus, but his scars as well. And, that Jesus had offered them peace and breathed on them the Holy Spirit—a gift of his presence with them forever.

Thomas, hurt and confused, demanded proof. He wanted to see this Jesus if he were to believe. And, who of us could blame him? When he left they were behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, for fear they would be identified as friends and subject to the same death. Thomas, most likely still in shock from the crucifixion, must have become more confused. He must have thought, “When I left you were fearful, now you are overjoyed and excited? What is going on?”

Yet even their telling of the story wasn’t enough to sway Thomas. “Show me—I want proof---then I will believe what you tell me!” Then....did you catch that verse in the Scripture...then a whole week went by. Idle time of waiting; creating an atmosphere of more confusion and doubt! This might have disheartened and frankly embarrassed the disciples. So, was Thomas over to the side thinking or even saying, “see I told you so?!” A week can feel like a long time if you are locked up in a room, the stifling air thick with tension. Belief or doubt?

However, even doors locked by fear aren’t enough to hold back Jesus. He appears to them again. This time Thomas was present. Isn’t it comforting to know that Jesus does not fuss at him or scold him. Have you ever thought about that? But ever so tenderly Jesus invites Thomas to see for himself the wounds and scars. And then, he invites Thomas to doubt no longer but to believe. Overwhelmed with

awe, Thomas confesses his faith, “My Lord and My God!” It was then that Thomas believed.

Jesus understood it necessary to meet Thomas exactly where he was. Sometimes Thomas gets a bad rap. Often we think, “oh, he should have been able to believe when the others told him about the first time Jesus came to them.”

Just as Peter and the others should have believed when Mary came running from the tomb on Easter morning. Yet, they too had to visit the tomb; to see for their selves in order to believe what Mary told them.

But, can we really fault them? All of this was new. Their lives were no longer the same as before. All that Jesus had taught them and shared with them had come to pass. The horror and fear was still very real. Fear had caused them to stay locked up in the safety and security not only of the upper room but also their closed hearts and minds. Exactly the reason Jesus came to them in peace and gentleness so they could touch him and speak to him. It allowed them to let go of their fear and to believe so that they would be able to go and tell others. It was the first steps toward a new way of life that called for them to be bold as they were sent to go and tell.

“Bishop Will Willimon tells of a story of when he was dean of the chapel at Duke University. There was a young guy, a student who was hanging around one day after the service—the way people sometimes do, as folks are saying goodbye

and commenting about the sermon or the service in some way, and shaking hands. He had not seen the young man before but reached out to shake his hand. The young man said to him, 'I would really like to talk with you some day.' They made an appointment to have lunch, and a few days later they were talking together in an out-of-the-way place on campus.

The young man said, 'I've done some bad things in my life.' To which Willimon thought, '*You can't imagine how many times I have heard that one from college students.*'

The young man said, 'I really have. I grew up in Michigan; as a teenager I got into drugs, pretty seriously, and it was all downhill from there. I would do pretty much anything to make the next score. I've stolen from my family and friends, and it got so bad that I became a male prostitute. Finally, I was caught using the credit card numbers of my clients and I was put in prison.

'They put me in a cell with a man who could barely read, who was teaching himself to read by going through the New Testament. There is a lot of empty time in prison, so I would listen to him, I would occasionally help him read, and then in time we would read it together. We came to that story in the New Testament about the Lost Son and the father who welcomes him home from the far country, and it hit me---this was it, this was true, this was my story. And I knew that I had been dead, and now I was alive, for some reason.

‘Well, later I got out of prison, I went back to school, I got into Michigan and then transferred to Duke. And now I’m here. I come to chapel most every week. I just wanted to have lunch with you and tell you this because I figure we’ve got Easter coming up in a few weeks, and you preachers are always scrounging around for stories. I just wanted to tell you that, this year, I’m your Easter Story. I’m your proof.’”

Whether we lock ourselves away for fear because it gives us a feeling of safety and security; or whether we find ourselves locked away due to circumstances beyond our control; or whether we find ourselves behind prison doors because we messed up and made a mistake. Like a ray of light shines through a keyhole, the light of the Risen Lord shines into our locked up rooms giving us that glimpse hope in our uncertainty; giving us belief in the midst of our doubt; and a boldness that enables us to take that first step over the threshold of an opened door.

I find it fascinating that John concludes this account with an unusual comment among the narrative gospels. He states the purpose of these writings: “These stories are told so that those who read them might also come to believe.” The invitation to believe is not for Thomas alone. It is for us as well. When suffering and uncertainty; grief and pain hit us; the challenge/temptation for us is to lock ourselves away in fear. Yet even in our deepest pain and loss; when

everything in our life has turned upside down, Jesus come to us and offers us peace. Jesus wants us to remain in fear of suffering or death no longer. Jesus has gone before us to show us the way so we might believe in the power of God to overcome death with life. With tender love and care, he invites us to believe without seeing so that we may boldly tell others that Jesus is the Christ sent from God.

On this day, the Good News for us is that Jesus' life continued as the disciples continued Jesus' work in the world. We follow in their footsteps. So, receive the tender love and care Jesus offers through God's grace will transform our doubt and fear to bold faith. Then go; tell and share the work of Jesus in the world that the story of God's power to turn fear into hope; tears into joy; doubting into believing; and death into life will be told through your life.