

Sermon April 19th, 2020

Jesus Gives Us Words of Peace

I have someone with me this morning who has asked to share their story with us. “Go ahead faithful disciple.” *Then I walk away and the faithful disciple walks in.* “Thank you pastor Wallace. Good morning everybody. Well, a few months back I ran into a friend of mine from the town I grew up in. They had just heard about Jesus of Nazareth getting crucified, and remembered that I was one of the people who chose to follow Jesus. So, they asked me the question that was pressing on many people’s minds. What happened? This is what I said to them.”

“I don’t really know what happened. Life was going well for us followers of Jesus. We saw Jesus heal many people from their ailments. We saw how his words gave hope and changed so many who were down and out. More and more people gave up everything to follow Jesus and hear his teachings. We were encountering thousands of people per day.

When we finally arrived at the gates of Jerusalem we entered with cheers and shouts of praise. Jesus then led us to the Temple where he cleansed it from those barriers that made it harder for us to experience God. We participated in the Passover meal together. The food was delicious. We washed each other’s feet.

Now come to think of it, Jesus did start talking in a way that had us a little worried for his well being. We didn’t get bent out of shape over it though. When we went with Jesus to the garden to pray. We were still relaxed enough to fall asleep.

Then how everything changed when those guards came to arrest Jesus. Driven by fear, Peter cut off someone’s ear. So, unlike Peter. When Jesus was put into chains our fears and anxiety ramped up even more. We bolted so we didn’t end up in chains right along side our teacher.

Peter did stay close enough to see what was happening during Jesus’ so-called trial. I remember him telling us about the abuse. The humiliation. We were terrified that we would be next.

Later that afternoon, the women came in where we were hiding out, sobbing, and told us the bad news. Jesus was dead. We couldn’t believe it.

Since the moment of Jesus' arrest, we lived in this constant state of fear and anxiety. Wondering when it was our turn. Struggling to understand how to move forward with what Jesus taught us without Jesus being there.

Of course, the Mary's came to us after Sabbath, and told us that the tomb was empty. They went on to tell us that they had met Jesus near the tomb. But, we doubted. Did they really see Jesus or were they so upset that they mistook someone else for Jesus? What ever happened to Jesus' body? Have we not suffered enough?" "I need to take a break before continuing pastor Wallace."

"Okay faithful disciple. Take all the time you need." What we hear so far from the disciples' testimony is that those who followed Jesus lived in a constant state of fear and anxiety after his arrest.

Have you ever lived in a period of constant fear and anxiety? For example, you struggle with a phobia or an anxiety illness that challenges your ability to deal with certain situations or stimuli.

Ten years ago, in a CT Scan they found a lesion in my brain. The doctors didn't know what it was, but felt the best recourse was to monitor the lesion to see if it changes. So, for the first few years I had two MRI's a year. For most people, this is an in and out test. For myself, who struggled with severe claustrophobia, an upcoming MRI left me in a state of fear and anxiety for up to a month before my MRI. This lasted until after the test was done. In fact, they had to put me under general anesthetic for the first several MRIs. The first time I went under, the doctor told me afterwards, that I passed out before the needle even went in. I guess the anxiety was overwhelming to say the least. The next time I had an MRI my blood pressure was 180 over 110 though I didn't pass out. I don't know what I was so afraid of, but I felt my stomach turn. I couldn't think right. I had these irrational thoughts of the MRI tech locking my head in and not letting me out no matter how loud I screamed. It was total nonsense, but in the moment those fears felt so real. I can say that I no longer go under general anesthetic. But, I still feel a lot of anxiety and fear before entering an MRI.

Others I know have what they call general anxiety illness. People with this mental illness are living in a constant state of anxiety. Almost everything they experience triggers irrational thoughts and debilitating fears. So, for some of us fear and anxiety are part of our daily lives.

Outside of the sphere of mental illness, many of us face fears and anxiety from time to time, especially when we face a crisis. It is safe to say that for most of us in this world we are living in a constant state of fear and anxiety as we face this pandemic. We worry about our economy. Our physical and mental health. Our loved ones. Our global family. Our futures. Our most vulnerable populations. We wrestle with those annoying irrational thoughts that keep making things worse for us.

More than ever before many of us can empathize with the disciples and their feelings of fear and anxiety as we hear our gospel this morning. Afraid. Anxious. Waiting for some good news to come. Waiting for things to get back to normal. Waiting to see if Jesus really is alive.

“Hey faithful disciple. Are you ready to continue your story?” *I walk away and the faithful disciple walks back in* “Sure, Pastor Wallace.” “So, we decided to hideout behind closed doors waiting and wondering when or if Jesus will appear to us. We had someone keep watch all hours of the day just in case the religious or political leaders found our hideout and arrested us all.

As we were living in this constant state of fear and anxiety we noticed someone new in the middle of the room. We were trying to wrap our heads around it. No one knocked on the door or came barging into the house we were staying in. This person just appeared. I remember as we all stared pondering who this could be. This person said “Peace be with you.” This person then showed us their wounds. Right then we knew we were standing in the presence of the risen Christ. Jesus again uttered the words “Peace be with you.” I remember feeling a sense of calm come over me that is hard to describe. I no longer felt the fear and anxiety that plagued me. I was finally able to hear Jesus’ good news and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

“Of course, Thomas missed out. He was still overwhelmed by his fears and anxieties. Well, the very next week, Jesus entered our home again to offer these same words of peace to Thomas. He too was changed by this experience.” “And that is my story Pastor Wallace. That is what happened to Jesus and to us.” “Thank you, faithful disciple”.

So, according to the second part of the faithful disciple's story, Jesus breathes peace into their hearts more than once to get them to a place where they can calmly listen to the good news Jesus has to offer.

Kind of like when our child or grandchild reacts to something not going their way. They fall into this dramatic temper tantrum where they breath irregularly. Their faces turn red. They are wailing their arms and legs around. Screaming.

As their parent or grandparent, we know that if we react in a similar way we will just make things worse. So, we try to comfort them. We reach out to hold them. We coach them to take some deep soothing breathes. Our main focus is to help them find some comfort and peace in this moment. Once they have calmed down then we can have a constructive conversation with them to help turn this moment into a time of learning and hope for something new.

Jesus comes into our lives when we are living in fear and anxiety and offers us not just one word of peace, but as many as we need to feel God's comfort and presence. Jesus offers us peace in Word and Sacrament as we worship. How many times have you come away from a worship service feeling at peace with your current situation? Jesus offers us peace through prayer. How often have you heard God's voice in prayer and felt a sudden calmness come over you? Jesus offers us peace through the gift of the Holy Spirit. How often have you felt this inner peace during a crisis, and couldn't explain why? Jesus does whatever it takes to calm our hearts so we can listen to the good news that says to us today:

"Peace be with you. I invite you to let go of your fears and anxieties and trust in my presence. Open your eyes to see that God's redeeming love is touching your lives in ways you can't even imagine. And join me in revealing this redeeming love to others."

Let us pray, comforting God, when we feel afraid and anxious open our hearts to see your Son standing among us giving us peace. Give us faith to believe that you are with us always calming our hearts. Redeeming us from our suffering. Equipping us to be your hands and feet in our hurting world.

Amen.

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