

“From Fear to Power: New Life from the Risen Christ”

A sermon prepared by the Rev. Hank Lay
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Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1--2:2; John 20:19-31

“From Fear to Power”

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to God who speaks to us through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Have you ever face a situation with fear and trembling?

Perhaps as a child being called down to the principal's office

Perhaps, young or old, being stopped by a police car

Perhaps waiting for a medical diagnosis

Perhaps the birthing of your first child

The day started ordinarily enough. And suddenly - the emotions built in a direction that was unexpected.

Last week we heard the story of the women at the tomb of Jesus. They went expecting one thing - to anoint a dead body - and encountered something unexpected. They fled with fear and trembling. Today we hear that the disciples, that same day, were gathered, bewildered by the news. And again something unexpected occurred.

To add to the disciples' fear and trembling we read today that Jesus shows up unannounced. He was dead. He was buried. What is he doing here? AAAHHHHH!! Look, his wounds are still oozing blood. Yes, it is him! AAAHHH!!

But then he says, Peace. Not once but twice. Peace - despite the marks of violence and suffering. How can he say that? And he wants us to do something. He wants us to go and forgive sins, to forgive all the rejection and hurts that mark our experience. And his breath - he is blowing on us his breath and saying it is the Holy Spirit. Can that really change our lives??

Of course, it does change their lives. After 50 days of adjustment that breath became a windstorm that empowered all the disciples and sent them into the world. The story from Acts gives us a glimpse of the changes that took place. Publicly the disciples taught and lived the way of Jesus. And amazing things happened.

The story we hear today is not new; we have heard it countless times. Yet, it contains words that might fill us with fear and trembling. "As the Father sent me so I send you." That is John's way of saying, 'Take up your cross and follow me.' If there is no fear and trembling there then we don't know what Jesus is saying.

He had just showed his scars. Not 'healed-over' scars such as those that many

of us carry around from surgeries or accidents, but raw, oozing scars. Scars that expressed hatred and violence. Scars inflicted in order to produce pain and suffering. No wonder the disciples were afraid. If, as is commonly said, they had the door locked for fear that they would be next, Jesus is not relieving those fears. 'Follow me, but be prepared for these.' It takes the strong commitment of a Francis of Assisi to accept the stigmata, the scars of Christ. The scars on Francis' body made his sleeping difficult and they would often bleed, making them difficult to hide.

So how did the disciples 'rejoice'? How might we rejoice?

Jesus said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Receive the life force of all creation. Receive the very presence of God within yourselves, individually and as a community. Move from fear to power and become the people of God in the world.

The story from Acts gives us a glimpse of what life is like when the Spirit is present. It is after Pentecost, and the disciples were "of one heart and soul." Bound together by the Spirit they discovered they **could** live as Jesus taught them. Their fear was changed. They had a story to tell, a story of resurrection and forgiveness. With God fear and trembling do not lead to the worst possible outcome. They result in God's outcome, an outcome of life and healing and sharing and joy. It is life marked by resurrection power.

And the followers demonstrated boldness, proclaiming and living the Way of Jesus in public. They returned to the Temple in Jerusalem, where Jesus himself had gone. They worshiped God as they had all their lives, but with a new understanding and a new joy. They taught all who asked about what God had done that had changed their lives. They continued the work of Jesus in the world. "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, and great grace was upon them all."

How might that look like today??

We demonstrate grace and power when we let it be known to family and friends that we try to honor Christ in word and deed, committed to the church and to compassion and justice in the world.

We demonstrate grace and power when we speak up gently against slurs and demeaning words against other races and ethnicities and religions.

We demonstrate grace and power when we use our finances to assist those beyond our own families who are struggling in life.

We demonstrate grace and power when we confess our complicity in sin and let the forgiveness of God cleanse us and through us the world around us.

There are those who want this pandemic to end so that life can return to

"normal." But Jesus does not offer us the old normal. He offers the new Kingdom.

In place of supremacy he calls us to compassion.

In place of comfort he calls us to service.

He knows our needs, and dares us to accept his answers to our problems. We have seen the underbelly of our society, and realize that normal will no longer cut it. Only forgiveness can lead to life-giving change. If we retain sins, if we are content with the status quo, those sins will destroy us and our beloved country. If we confess our reality, God is faithful and just and will forgive and create the beloved community for which we all long.

Because Jesus lives, we can live this new life. He has given us the Spirit.

Perhaps with the drama of Pentecost.

Perhaps with the gentle filling of his breath.

Perhaps in the mystery of baptism.

But make no mistake about it, we have power, the divine power of Love. So we can be bold to let that Love lead us into the world.

My friends, it is happening all around us. Our Social Ministries Committee lifts up the hungry, the abused, the struggling with gifts to many agencies. Our Justice and Peace Committee brings the new life of the Gospel to the oppressed and the marginalized, proclaiming God's powerless Love that overthrows loveless power. Our secular news media more and more tells stories of people committed to compassion and justice and changing our

world, one life and one situation at a time.

Each of us is an Easter child, touched by divine love and power. From Easter 2020 to Easter 2021 we have struggled, we have mourned, we have been anxious. We have grown impatient, we have been separated from family and friends, we have known pain. But we have never been alone. Gently and tenderly Jesus says to each of us, ‘I am here. I love you. Together we can go forward.’

The disciples were isolated in a closed room, confused by all that had happened. The future was so unclear. And Jesus showed up. He reminded them of the pain and hatred that was still in the world. But he gave them peace and the power of the Holy Spirit. And they went out to live the life of God and change the world.

This Easter we seem to be on the cusp of freedom from the virus. But we are reminded daily of the evils that still surround us, within and without. And Jesus says to us, “Peace. As the Father sent me so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. Be not afraid.” And so we go out, and in small and great ways demonstrate that we have seen the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.