

The disciples were afraid. They were paralyzed with fear. They did not dare go out; they huddled together in that small house. The doors were locked for fear of the Jews. They felt alone and vulnerable. They did not know what to make of what Mary Magdalene had told them, that she had seen the Lord. She was probably unstable, consumed with grief at the death of the one she had loved so deeply. They all felt a little unstable. Everything they had believed about Jesus seemed to have come to nothing. They had been crazy to follow him, regretting that they had left their families and their jobs. Now they just knew that they would be hunted down by the temple police, trying to eradicate whatever was left of this ragtag band of Jesus followers.

And then Jesus was among them. “Peace be with you,” he said, and they were no longer afraid.

Fear can be a terrible thing. It can paralyze us, or it can make us do stupid things. Biologically, fear is a response of the most ancient, reptilian part of our brains. It works very quickly to react to external threats, and it can save our lives when we are suddenly confronted with a dangerous situation which calls for immediate action. It activates the most basic “flight or fight” response. The problem is it bypasses the upper cognitive levels of our brain, and so we don’t think through the consequences of our actions.

We humans have been blessed with the ability to anticipate the future. We can think about how things will turn out before we actually do them. We can make plans to improve our lives. However, sometimes that means that we anticipate things that may not even happen. When those things seem dangerous or unpleasant it can create fear, even when there is nothing we can do about it. The disciples were afraid that they were being hunted down, when they did not even know if it was so. The fear created by anticipation can be more excruciating than

actually dealing with a situation at hand. We are afraid when we have had a biopsy, but have not heard the results yet. We are afraid when terrorists bomb a train or embassy, but there is nothing we can personally do about it. We are afraid for our own jobs when other people are being laid off. We are afraid walking down the street at night that we might be mugged. We are afraid of losing control, of losing our possessions, of sickness, of the bogeyman.

When we let those fears that we can do little about build up in us, we may feel panicky. Or we may wake up at night in a sweat of anxiety. We become suspicious of people who come too near. We may be easily manipulated to react in ways that we would not do normally. What shall we do, what shall we do?

And then Jesus is among us. "Peace be with you," he says. His peace erases fear.

Perhaps we can imagine what that scene with the frightened disciples must have been like. Fear rapidly can deteriorate into conflict and blaming. Peter asking Andrew, how did you ever get me into this? James blaming Peter, how could you deny the Lord? What were you doing in the courtyard anyway? The guilt of betrayal, the fear of being caught, the exhaustion of the day, all combined to make them testy. Maybe even to the point of fighting.

And then Jesus was among them. "Peace be with you," he says, and they realize how foolish they had been.

We too get ready to fight when we feel threatened and afraid. For some folks it is exhibited as road rage when someone cuts them off in traffic. For others it may be a nihilistic violence against the company that fired them, or the school that ignored them. We fight preventive wars because we fear we *might* be attacked. When bad things happen, the economy goes south, or if there is an accident we want to blame, we want revenge.

But then Jesus is among us. “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” His peace reminds us we are in this together, and he sends us to be peacemakers.

Thomas, of course, is not among the disciples when Jesus first appears in that room. He has trouble believing the incredible story. I am sure that he too is afraid and confused and remorseful. Perhaps he is afraid to believe in anything at that moment, afraid to put his trust into something that would disappoint him again. Sometimes our doubts come not from a rational, logical analysis, but simply from holding back, afraid to give everything we have to something that might cruelly disillusion us. So Thomas says, “Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” I don’t want to trust anything that will let me down again, he thinks.

And then Jesus was among them one more time. “Peace be with you,” he says. Jesus invites Thomas to touch the marks, but he did not need that. He had recognized Jesus in the moment he gave his peace, not in the marks of the body. The peace of Jesus erased his doubt.

Of course, we have no body to touch, no marks to put our fingers in. Like Thomas, we know the Lord, I believe, by the peace that he gives us. That peace comes because we know that we are a forgiven people. That peace comes from knowing that we rest in the security of God’s love, and that he will care for us. That peace comes from knowing that we do not need to fear anymore because death, that ultimate of all fears, is merely the doorway, the rebirth into a new existence. That peace comes from knowing Christ is very near us.

Most of our life is spent on a quest for happiness. Too often people seek happiness in having a comfortable life, or in material things, in buying the next new car, or new clothes. Some of us try to find happiness in the approval of others through our achievements. Others of

us try to find happiness in accumulating knowledge and education, as if knowing all the answers will make us happy. Still others try to find happiness in pleasure experiences. St. Augustine spent most of his life in a search for happiness in all of those ways, but he found that in the end true happiness could only be found in a relationship with God. In our relationship with God, we find peace, and that makes us happy.

Several polls have shown that religious, spiritually committed people are twice as likely to report being happy than non-religious people. Some researchers have suggested that it is because of the benefits of being involved in the social contact and support of an organization or of volunteering at something significant. But I would suggest that real happiness come from the peace of mind that is given to us by Jesus.

This peace is not our personal possession; it is to be shared. “As my Father has sent me I send you,” Jesus says. We are to share his peace by comforting those who are fearful, by reconciling those who are in conflict, by reassuring and teaching those who are in doubt. Many of us know people who we would call holy people. We know them by their imperturbable demeanor, by a certain transparency of spirit, and by their love. We know them by their peace. I want us all to be holy people.

Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Peace be with you.