

“The Opposite of Fear”

John 20:19-31
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4/11/10

‘Low-Sunday’ is not an official part of the liturgical calendar, but referring to this first Sunday following Easter as ‘Low-Sunday’ is certainly a tradition in ministerial circles, and I’m sure you can understand why. After all the highs of Easter Sunday, everything is just...lower this Sunday – after the highpoints of music accompanied by brass and magnificent organ and bells and Easter anthems; after bringing out ‘Alleluia’ in full voice; after filling the pews with visitors and relatives and friends; after a sanctuary newly draped in golden butterflies and filled with pungent lilies; after a profound and provocative Easter sermon by Rev. Russell... well, today, no offense meant to the musicians or preacher (and no offense to any visitors either!), but it’s clear everything is just a bit lower today – no brass, no bells, no blooms, no Easter sermon...Low-Sunday.

Maybe you could call John 20:19 ‘low-Sunday-EVENING’. It’s not the week after Easter, it’s the evening of Easter Day, the evening following the miraculous events of Jesus’ resurrection encountered by Jesus’ followers that morning. And although the gospels give us a jigsaw collection of details about the events surrounding Jesus’ resurrection, in putting them all together, it is clearly a good-news picture given for the day: the various followers of Jesus, women and men, disciples and devotees, encounter the stunning truth that Jesus is alive – it is an Alleluia day! So you might expect some sort of carousing celebration going on in the evening, right? An Easter party...use up that leftover Passover wine...maybe even an egg hunt for the kids! But no, instead, what is

described to us is this scene: ‘when it was evening of that day...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews...’ The evening of this incredible day, and the disciples are...afraid – huddled together in a house with the doors bolted shut. The Easter Alleluia has faded quickly – Jesus’ followers are afraid - it’s ‘low-Sunday-evening’...so why would that be?

We know what happens next – Jesus appears to them, and that’s good – but before we get to that, doesn’t it seem important to wonder WHY the disciples are afraid? I doubt that the disciples being afraid is something you would predict as part of the story – and it certainly wouldn’t be included in John if he was just trying to give a sanitized version of events to make things look ideal: ‘Jesus was alive and everyone was happy – The End’ – that would be a good propaganda line. But instead there is this honest narrative - and once we do hear that they are afraid, I think it can strike us as quite understandable – they’re just a small group of people with little power or resources – and they really don’t know, can’t grasp yet, what this all means: Jesus being alive. It’s good that Jesus is alive – but the Jewish authorities are alive too, and they may well be tracking the disciples down. As we look at the setting, we can understand their fear – and fear is something with which we are all familiar. Fear is a complicated sort of feeling to describe – to dissect and understand – but we all know the feeling of it, there in your gut, gnawing away; or pounding in your chest, your heartbeat drowning out your brain.

I looked back at a sermon I preached on this passage about twenty years ago – and God bless those who heard it; no – I won’t be too self-deprecating...it was an OK sermon – and in that sermon I tried to define something of what fear is about, and spent most of

the time talking about fear as having to do with the unknown – fear as ‘not knowing.’

And that still seems partly right to me – a significant part of our reality as human beings is that we don’t know what is ahead for us, and that can be scary. It’s partly the reality of not being in control of everything, or even many things; it’s partly that we are ambushed by unexpected events; it’s partly that while not knowing what’s ahead, we also imagine all sorts of scary scenarios as possibilities. Perhaps we even fear how much we really don’t know about ourselves, or those around us. There is this fragility of the unknown about being human, and there is a fear in it. The disciples were feeling that fear of the unknown on that low Sunday evening – what does this all mean? What do we do? Who can we trust?

But twenty years after that sermon where I focused on fear as being about ‘not knowing’, I’ve been thinking this week that fear has a lot to do with what we DO know as well. We learn that there are certain things to fear in life – we come to know powers that are destructive and oppressive; we come to know what is hurtful to us and others; there are people who live in circumstances that they know all too well the forces that can harm them or the scarcities that diminish them – and those are fear-full realities, powers, threats to face. We even come to know our own weaknesses and shadows, and may fear they are too much to overcome. The disciples knew who to be afraid of – they knew who could threaten them – they knew who had power (and that they didn’t) - they knew their own failures and weaknesses. What we DO know can be fear-full too.

So it is in this setting, this circumstance of fear, that Jesus appears. The risen Christ now reveals himself to them as they’re gathered together – this is a big moment:

what can Jesus say to these fear-filled followers? What is needed? Jesus says...“Peace”...“Peace be with you”...I suppose Jesus could have said ‘Hello everyone - this evening I have a few main points to emphasize to you – it’s important that you understand the theological significance of my resurrection as a universal and eschatological triumph of life over death, which makes atonement not just a personal transaction but a communal experience of the reign of God over all things.’ Jesus could have said that, but he didn’t – in the face of fear, something much simpler and more profound is needed: “Peace” – the opposite of fear? – Peace.

Now I just referred to a sermon I preached twenty years ago, but how about one I preached a few months ago – during Advent, you might recall that I preached about the ‘opposite of joy’ – and I said that the opposite of joy is fear. So then, if we’re going to be logical about things, you should be able to turn that around and say that the opposite of fear is joy, right? Well, not exactly. It is true that joy is mentioned here in this story from John – that the disciples rejoice once they see and hear Jesus among them – so you can hopefully see there is some merit in that fear-joy connection I’ve made. But the main antithesis we’re given here to fear is “Peace” – and I think that tells us a couple of things. It tells us that fear is the root of much that opposes what is life-giving – fear IS the antithesis to joy, AND to peace; fear is the antithesis to faith and to hope and to love. I’ve come to understand fear and violence as being the core of what is at odds with the life-giving ways of God. Fear has the power to control so much in us and so much in our world – the power to deform perceptions and hijack choices in ways that lead to division and violence. Fear has to do with what we don’t know and what we do know, and it

becomes the center of so much of what we perceive and how we act. Individually and collectively, fear is a fearsome power. And that is the reality confronted with this word from Jesus: “peace”.

Which tells us we also need to understand what “peace” is about.

And perhaps the most important thing to understand is not just the word, but the fact that it is JESUS saying the word “Peace”. When Jesus says “Peace be with you”, it is as much saying “I am with you” – the Risen Christ is the expression of and embodiment of and presence of what Peace is. And if fear is the combined deadening power of what we don’t know and what we do know, then what “Peace” on the lips of and in the person of Christ does is confront such fear with what is known in Jesus. There in the person of Christ, risen from the dead, is what we truly need to know – to refer to one other sermon, as Jill said last week on Easter Sunday:

...in the story of Easter we discover that the ways that make for peace - the deep conviction and compassion that Jesus embodied all the way to the cross are not destroyed or defeated with his death...the power of God is stronger than the powers of this world: forgiveness and healing is stronger than the bonds of sin and brokenness; love and justice and reconciliation will prevail over fear and oppression and division.

In the risen Christ there is a new “known”, a new “knowing” that fundamentally changes reality and living and life – that is “Peace” – this truth about the power of life given to us by God in Jesus Christ to bring in to the midst of our lives.

Which makes it important to say too what Peace isn’t. I heard a little clip awhile ago about a top list of things NOT to say to a spouse or significant other in the midst of a difficult situation – at the top of the list for what NOT to say when someone is upset was:

“just calm down” “just relax” – because that usually just makes someone more upset! I know there can be good intentions in saying that and a time for such words as well, but mostly it can convey a sense of minimizing what someone is feeling or experiencing.

“Peace be with you” is not Jesus saying ‘everybody just calm down’ – it’s not ‘everything is OK’ ‘don’t worry, be happy’. It’s not Jesus mollifying us by minimizing our fears; it’s not Jesus shaming us for our weakness in being afraid or urging us to try harder to think positive thoughts. The “Peace” Jesus speaks and embodies is none of those things, but it is this: Jesus recognizing the insidious power that fear holds in our lives and our world, and holding, embracing his followers with the only truth that speaks to the heart of our fears: I am with you ~ Peace be with you.

Peace is not knowing a set of facts, it is the knowing of a relationship of love and life with the Risen Christ. In the Gospel of John, this isn’t just low-Sunday-evening, it is also Pentecost – in saying “Peace” to them Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit; and with that life-breath of the living presence of Christ, they are freed from fear to faithfulness as Jesus sends them out in his name. The opposite of fear isn’t just a word, but a person and presence – in a world of fear: Jesus, our Peace, and for the whole world.

AMEN.