

## **“Ann Frank Would Understand”**

**John 20:19-23**

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“I cannot tell you how oppressive it is never to be able to go outdoors. Also, I am afraid we shall be discovered and shot.” This was the entry into Ann Frank’s diary on July 11, 1942.

Ann was the German born Jewish girl who wrote a diary while hiding with her family and four friends in Amsterdam during the German occupation of the Netherlands during World War II. As persecutions against the Jewish population increased, Ann’s family went into hiding in July, 1942 in the attic of a spice exporting business. Ann was thirteen years old. After two years of hiding, Ann’s family and their friends were betrayed and transported to the concentration camp system where Ann and her sister died just weeks before the war ended and they would have been liberated.

Ann’s father, Otto, survived and found her diary when he returned to their hiding place in Amsterdam. This was the red and white checkered cloth bound diary he gave her on her thirteenth birthday. It chronicles the events of her life from June 12, 1942 until the final entry on August 1, 1944. Ann’s diary, published under the title Ann Frank, Diary of a Young Girl, has been translated into sixty-seven languages.

I think Ann could understand the disciples’ dilemma. Both were hiding from the authorities. Ann lived for two years in what was labeled “The Secret Annex,” careful not to let anyone know where she was. The door to the attic was covered by a bookcase to insure that it remained undiscovered. Special precautions were taken by the family to make sure the workers below never heard any noise. Between nine in the morning and seven in the evening, no faucets could be turned on, toilets could be flushed and walking was kept to a bare minimum.

Several years ago I walked up the steps behind that bookcase to the room where Ann and her family lived. I was gripped with remorse and grief as I thought of what life must have been like for this family, always listening for footsteps that could lead to their imprisonment and death.

**Fear is real, isn’t it?** Scientists say that it is the oldest human instinct and one of the first emotions an infant experiences. This is because we live in a world where our safety and comfort are threatened with four basic fears: want, suffering, failure and death.

Fear has certainly been heightened in our country since September 11, 2001. Terrorist threats disrupt our lives periodically as we saw last Wednesday at the Hartsville-Jackson International Airport when travel was suspended for three hours because a security screener saw a suspicious object in a piece of luggage. One hundred twenty flights were delayed or canceled, stranding people long into the night.

**Fear is real and it can be really devastating.** It can do more than disrupt our schedules. It can restrict and paralyze us, causing us to lose our confidence and courage.

This appears to be the case with the early disciples gathered in the upper room on Easter evening. John said they were gathered behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Why were they hiding? They feared that the authorities, which had shown no mercy in recent days, were not content with crucifying Jesus but wanted to kill them, too. This was a valid concern. It made sense to keep a low profile and go into hiding. I find no fault with their desire to protect themselves.

**The devastating grip of fear can be broken, though.** I have to believe that process began for the disciples with Jesus’ visit. For you see, someone did show up that evening in the upper room, but it was not who they were expecting. Instead of being the authorities seeking to harm them, it was Jesus wanting to help them. Can you imagine how comforting and reassuring this was?

If the disciples had been Baptists, surely they would have broken out in song.

Just when I need him, Jesus is near.  
Just when I falter, just when I fear;  
Ready to help me, ready to cheer,  
Just when I need him most.

**What did Jesus do to help them while they were hiding behind locked doors?** He restored their confidence and courage. He helped them understand that “courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important.” What was more important was spreading the gospel, the good news of God’s redeeming love. And who better to talk about forgiveness than those that had been forgiven for deserting Jesus in his hour of greatest need? The disciples were experts on making mistakes and needing second chances. They knew how necessary and powerful grace was and Jesus knew they had a story that people needed to hear.

Then, Jesus assured the disciples they would not go alone to share their story. “He **breathed** on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ ”

You recognize that this is John’s brief account of Pentecost, the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to send the Comforter. He wanted the disciples to know that when they left that room they would not go alone. The Spirit of God would be with them providing what they needed to accept this challenge in a dangerous world.

Did his appearance make a difference in the lives of the disciples? I certainly think it did. I believe Jesus breathed new life in them just as God’s Spirit brought life to man at creation and revived the dry bones that Ezekiel saw in his vision. Jesus restored their confidence and courage so they could leave that room, take up their cross and follow him.

I also believe God’s empowering Spirit can achieve the same results in our lives. Wasn’t this John’s purpose for including this story in his post-resurrection narratives? Weren’t his readers facing persecution and fearing for their lives? Yes, and many of them were hiding behind closed doors, too. However, John was convinced it was not a time for fear to dominate or control them. It was a time for faith to overcome fear and inspire them to take risks and be faithful to the Christ that was faithful to them. This story was meant to encourage them to be bold and I think it has the same purpose for us today.

You may be facing intimidating challenges, going through a crisis, or struggling with a problem that has restricted and paralyzed you. Your courage and confidence are gone. Worry and fear are controlling you and holding you back.

Must you live the rest of your life a hostage to your worries? No! It is time for you to stand up to your fears and confront them. It is time for you to lean upon God’s strength and grace and leave your self-imposed prison. It is time to get back your voice and reclaim your confidence and courage. It is not a time for fear but faith!

Would you let Jesus breathe new life in you? Would you let him accompany you along your journey giving you the confidence and courage you need to face your challenges, struggles and problems? Would you let him help you understand that “courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear?” I hope you will because much is at stake.

There is an inscription over the mantle at the Hind’s Head Inn in England which states, “Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there.”

I challenge you, with God’s help, to go open that door!