

“From Fear to Faith”

John 20:19-23

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Stone Mountain, Georgia
April 15, 2007

What would you have done first? If you were the resurrected Jesus, where would you have gone on Easter? Would you have gone to Pilate and had a chat with him? Would you have walked into the temple and confronted the religious authorities that rejected you? Would you have found the soldiers that abused you and sought revenge?

Jesus did none of these and I'm not surprised. The man that died with forgiving words on his lips wasn't going to come back with revenge in his heart.

So, where did he go? He went to find the disciples so he could help them. Again, I am not surprised. In his last meeting with them, he made some bold promises, and one was that after leaving them, he would return. He assured them that he would not leave them as orphans, lost and wandering. He would come back to give them peace, joy and power.

One theme that runs through John's gospel is Christ's fidelity to his word. He portrays Jesus as reliable, dependable and trustworthy. Jesus' return to his disciples on Easter evening is another example of this. Jesus was a man of his word!

Where were the disciples and what did they need from him? They were in seclusion somewhere around Jerusalem, possibly in the Upper Room where they assembled with Jesus during Passover. John records that they were gathered behind locked doors out of fear of the authorities, which had shown no mercy in recent days. Animosity toward Jesus was another theme in John, and the disciples reasoned that the authorities were not content with crucifying Jesus, but wanted to kill everyone associated with him. Therefore, it made sense to keep a low profile and go into hiding.

What did they need from Jesus? This would be a pretty long list. Put yourself in their shoes. What would you need? Assurance of his resurrection and presence with them. Peace. Release from guilt. Forgiveness. Direction for the future. Companionship. Courage. Confidence. Power. I believe I would have these on my list and I suspect it was on theirs.

Was Jesus aware of their needs and did he meet them? It certainly appears that he was and began that process. Listen to how John describes it.

“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his sides. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven’ ”
John 20:19-23.

You recognize this is John's account of Pentecost, the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send the Comforter. He wanted the disciples to know that when they left that room, and they would, they would not go alone. The Spirit of God would be with them providing what they needed to accept the challenge of continuing his work in a dangerous world. He would guide and empower them, enabling them to do far more than they ever imagined.

One reason I appreciate this text so much is because it teaches me what it means to be Easter people. Followers of the resurrected Jesus find those that are struggling with fear, guilt, confusion, doubts, failure and loneliness and offer to help them. They enter their world, empathize with them and walk by their side along their journey. They offer words of encouragement, hope, healing and restoration. They teach them new ways to think and show them new roads to travel. They share their own struggles with those in bondage, just as Jesus did when

he showed the disciples his wounds, and tell about the difference the redeeming and transforming love of God has made in their lives.

This was John's message to his readers. Just as Jesus was anxious to return to his disciples to release them from the bonds of fear, guilt and confusion, so must they be willing to become the presence of Christ and help others held hostage to the same things. Like him, they must not let locked doors and thick walls keep them out. They must be patient, yet as passionate and determined as Jesus was.

Who do you know that models this kind of compassion and grace? The first people that come to my mind are teachers. How many times have I seen a teacher make a dramatic difference in the life of a student?

William Willimon says that a teacher of an inner city school told him that her greatest challenge day after day is looking into the eyes of her high school students and seeing many who had simply shut down. They had failed so often, had experienced so many doors slamming in their faces that they had withdrawn. They had locked the door and thrown away the key.

"My whole teaching is involved in desperately searching for some key that can unlock that mind and give me some entrance into their souls," she told him.

Isn't this the task of every believer? If the first thing the resurrected Jesus did was to find his disciples and release them from fear and confusion, how can our priorities be any different? What is more important than this?

In one of Tom Ehrich's recent articles titled, "Christian Community," he writes, "Christianity's health isn't about doctrine, liturgical style, location, architecture or anything that can be bought or intellectualized. From childhood through adulthood, church is about community, places to feel safe and loved, so that we can dare to grow up, dare to make our way in the world, dare to disagree with the powers that be and dare to face death. If Christians can stop arguing about things Jesus did not mention or value, and if we could turn down our institutional ambitions and pride, we would see that our singular contribution to these difficult times is community. Our anonymous and fragmented world is desperate for authentic community. That need starts with childhood and I don't think we ever outgrow it."

Who do you know that is struggling and living in isolation? Fear, guilt, confusion, failure and doubts have locked them in a prison without bars and without help they will stay there forever.

What can you do to reach them? How can you let them know of the redeeming and empowering love of God? What can you do to lead them out of their self-imposed prison?

Dr. Alan Culpepper says that Easter is a movement from fear to faith. Today's text shows us that everyone needs help on that journey. This week, with God's help, will you be sensitive to those around you that are struggling on their pilgrimage and walk with them?