

No Fear  
1 John 1:1-22; Acts 4:32-25  
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First Presbyterian Church  
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Can you imagine the feelings that must have filled the disciples as they ended that first Easter day a couple of thousand years ago? Just two days before, all their hopes and dreams were on the rocks. Everything they had imagined and dreamed was over. All their hopes ended on a Roman cross on a rocky hill. Then the body of their master, whom they had believed was the Messiah that would free Israel from the Romans, was placed in a rich man's tomb to await proper burial procedures on the day after the Sabbath. Suddenly the word came that the tomb was empty. Then reports began to trickle in that people had seen Jesus. The first reports came from women whose accounts everyone knew couldn't be trusted, and that, of course, was an incorrect first-century stereotype of women. Then it was reported that Peter had seen him, that two men who were on their way to Emmaus had walked with him and eaten with him. Finally, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room, and they felt his hands and his feet. Even with these reports, not all the disciples believed.

Of the inner circle the prominent holdout was Thomas who said he wouldn't believe unless he could put his hands in the Lord's wounds, and he has ever since earned himself the title of "Doubting Thomas." During that next week, Jesus apparently appeared to no one, but the next Sunday he suddenly presented himself to the disciples as they were gathered, this time with Thomas among them. He invited Thomas to feel the wounds and to believe. Thomas then gives the most succinct, complete theological statement of who Jesus is in the words, "My Lord and My God!" Had we been able to read all the lectionary texts for today, this would have been the Gospel Lesson.

However, the real question is not one of theology, for supposed "right theology" has never saved a soul. No matter how ordered and concise our theologies may be, they don't have saving power. Only our relationship with Jesus carries that, and so, once we have a living Lord with whom we can walk, what are the practical effects of that? That is the question that the disciples had to face after their second encounter with the Risen Jesus. It is this question that the passages from 1 John and Acts answer for us.

As the disciples began over time to see more clearly that they were to take a life-giving and life-saving message to the world, those who had shivered in fear only a short time before, suddenly began to stand as heralds for the Risen Jesus everywhere they went. They had no fear. Stonings, wild animals in the arena, the executioner's sword, crucifixions, and beatings could not stop them from proclaiming the message of freedom in life and in death in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Like them, the mantra of Christians all across the centuries, right down to our day has been and should be, "No Fear; No Fear; No Fear," for there is no longer anything—

ANYTHING—that has any ultimate hold on us except the Lord Jesus Christ. So, if there is nothing that can have any binding effect on us, what can we face as disciples of the Lord Jesus?

I'm inclined to think that the thing we may most fear is being rocked out of our comfortable lives. This sermon isn't really for you. It is for me, because when we walk with Jesus he has a strange way of showing us our weaknesses and asking us to shed them for something more powerful. For me that has always been the scary part of being a Christian. I had my ideas of what I wanted to do with my life, and at every turn, I ran into Christ who had a road sign that turned me in a different direction.

I have always been something of a loner. Social small talk is not my strength. I have always liked the outdoors, so as I tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, I was drawn to outdoor vocations. One was that of a forest ranger where I could wander the Colorado Rockies on a horse enjoying and preserving the beauty of God's world. I also had thoughts of going to Colorado State University to study Veterinary Medicine. After all, I was more comfortable with animals who could kick, bite, and scratch than I was with people who could talk back. But the Lord didn't want to hear my fears. So, to find a way to sort out my life, I did what any sensible person would do—I joined the Army.

While stationed in England, I was drawn to the base chapel where I became the choir director for the chapel choir and also spent a lot of time in Wesley Chapel in Harrogate, one of the oldest Methodist churches in England. I felt the Lord's tugging toward the ministry, and actually considered staying in England and studying for the Methodist ministry. However, that wasn't where I wanted to go. I had hopes of going back to the states, getting a degree in music, and then returning to Europe to try to make it on the opera stage. I did return to the states, and did get a degree in voice, but the Lord knew better than I did, for he kept tugging and pulling.

As I began to experience "the communion with the Father and the Son" about which John talks, something happened to me. I realized that I couldn't just live life for myself whether alone in the mountains or in veterinary medicine or in music. I could not live my life being afraid of other people, and what they might or might not think of me. As John says:

If we claim that we experience a shared life with him and continue to stumble around in the dark, we're obviously lying through our teeth—we're not *living* what we claim. But if we walk in the light, God himself being the light, we also experience a shared life with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God's Son, purges all our sin.

I felt I had a relationship with Jesus and his Father, but I didn't want to extend that circle to include other people. I was still walking mostly in the dark, because Christianity is not a cloistered faith. It is meant to be lived out in the world among people, even those who are morally ugly, cruel, and hurtful. I know that is hard, but that is what we are called to do. Such people scare us. We don't like them. All too often we fall back on the popular belief that they are going to get it from God one day. But I wonder if that is really true?

Listen once more to John.

I write this, dear children, to guide you out of sin. But if anyone does sin, we have a Priest-Friend in the presence of the Father: Jesus Christ, righteous Jesus. When he served as a sacrifice for our sins, he solved the sin problem for good—not only ours, but the whole world's.

If you have ever read the book *The Shack* or seen the movie, you know that it is a story that deals with the problem of evil in this world. Mac had a young daughter who was kidnapped and brutally killed by a serial killer who had taken the lives of four other young girls. Mac was devastated and bitter toward God. He could not believe that Papa, as his wife called God, was really loving. He goes back to the shack where his daughter was killed, and there he meets Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu (an Asian Indian word for “wind”). Over the next forty-eight hours his view of God and his understanding of God's love as shown in Jesus is magnified. Near the end, as Papa is leading him to where his daughter's body is hidden, they stop. Mac is asked to forgive his daughter's murderer, or as Papa says just to take his hands from around that person's throat. Mac doesn't want to. He wants him to hurt as he hurts. He wants him judged. But the Father says he is not interested in judgement, but rather he wishes to redeem this man, because he too is one of his children.

Christ has suffered and died and been raised for every human being who has ever lived. Because of him, none of us has anything to fear from God or each other. When we experience a relationship with Christ, we become part of his circle of love, which includes all of our neighbors—be they good, bad, mean, kind, hurtful, compassionate, or loving. If we can't love those around us, then we are still wandering around in the dark, and to quote John, lying through our teeth when we claim to love Jesus.

And this brings us to Acts. Notice what happened in the early church when they realized Jesus' love for them. It created a community. Old roles, fears, and identities fell away. There is no stratification or caste system in love. Everyone is equal. Everyone is valuable. Everyone can contribute to the wellbeing of the community. The first result of the incredible love of Jesus, shown in his crucifixion and resurrection, was the spontaneous creation of a community in which all things were held in common. Persons sold their possessions and pooled their resources, and the apostles distributed those goods for the wellbeing of the whole. The community worked together to help each other.

Not too long ago, I had some surgery that made it less than prudent to lift anything, much less run a snow blower. Naturally, it snowed. You know what happens to driveways that are not plowed and you drive on them. They become a skating rink, and the ice will be there until the spring thaw! Flo Beth shoveled some of it, but drifts and the pile that the city so helpfully plowed across the entrance to the drive was too hard to move. Where could we turn for assistance? I called a member of our church community who didn't live too far away and asked him if he could take ten or fifteen minutes and clear the rest of the driveway. He was

glad to, and at the end of the workday, he and his son stopped by, and with the snow blower did the job in short order. That's the way the Christian community can work. We work together. Because we have fellowship with Christ, we have fellowship with each other. Can we feel free to call up our fellow church members when we need help? That should be a given. We should have no fear to do that, for we are all in Christ.

I look around at the five houses that front my block over on fourth street. Of the five houses, four have snow blowers. All five have lawn mowers of one kind or another. I've often wondered how much money we all have tied up in those machines. If we were functioning like a Christian community should, we would have only one of each, or maybe two. We would share them. We would work out a schedule, so that the one who has to leave earliest would get the machine first, and then on down the line.

I remember my father, who grew up on a farm in Indiana, talking about harvest time back in the 1920s. No single farmer could afford the equipment to harvest the crops, so there were crews with a combine and an old steam engine who went from farm to farm to harvest the crops. That seemed eminently sensible, and still does. Granted, they paid for the service, but as I look around at the farms here, I can't imagine how much capital is tied up in equipment, much of which is used only occasionally. The Book of Acts is not talking about communism, which is a godless, forced collective operation. Acts is talking about a Christian community in which we spontaneously and willingly link arms and care for each other, whatever the needs.

Is that where the fear comes in again? We are, especially as Americans, afraid to give up our autonomy, our individualism. Because of what Jesus has done, the outgrowth of that week after the resurrection was a community like no one had ever seen before. No longer did they have to be afraid to let go of control of their lives. All they had to do was turn them over to the one who controls everything anyway. But it takes faith in the love of God the Father, the grace of Jesus, and fellowship-creating power of the Holy Spirit to let go.

Now I know we are not going to create that first century community here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are human, and humans haven't been able to pull that off for over 2000 years. But look around you here this morning. These are your friends, your brothers and sisters in Christ. These are your resources when confronted with things that rightly scare us. We are your family in Christ. If we live as we are asked to live by Jesus, we can be even closer to one another than we are to our genetic families, because Christ in his resurrection banishes all fears and destroys all barriers within the community of believers. If we can really believe that, we will have joy in this life with one another.

So, let's see if we got the message last week. There is no fear, because Christ the Lord is Risen; HE IS RISEN INDEED.

Amen.