

Sermon for Easter 2C

The Texts: John 20:19-21 and Acts 5:27-32

Today's lectionary readings work together, to give us a beautiful picture of the Easter hope we have in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The Gospel takes place on the evening of the first day of the resurrection, when the disciples were gathered together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, and Jesus came and stood amongst them, and said: "Peace be with you."

Why were they afraid? Because the Jewish leaders had conspired to have their friend, their teacher, and their leader put to death on a cross, and they were afraid they were going to be next. After Jesus sent Mary to his brothers with a message, the very next thing we hear about is the disciples gathered together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews.

It's very helpful to see how 'fear' is used in John's Gospel. That Greek word only occurs three times in John. The first is in 7:13; at the time when Jesus went secretly to the Feast of Tabernacles. He went secretly because the Jews were already looking for an opportunity to kill him, but his time to die hadn't come yet. While he was under cover, he heard some people saying he was a good man, and others said he was deceiving the crowd, and verse 13 says: "But no-one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews."

The second mention is in 19:38 when Joseph of Arimathea came to claim Jesus' body. John tells us Joseph "was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one, because of 'fear of the Jews.'"

The third occurrence is in today's Gospel, so every time 'fear' is mentioned in John's Gospel, it's related to the Jewish leaders... What does that say about the state of God's people in that day, and not just the leaders, who were feared, but the people who feared them?

How did Jesus address their fear? First he came to them and said: "Peace be with you." Then he showed them the wounds on his hands and his side, and verse 20 says: "Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

His wounds helped to prove it really was him, in the flesh, not a ghost, or an apparition, but really him, back from the dead, still bearing the marks from the Cross. Imagine their situation; how could you not rejoice when the Lord, who was dead, had come back to life? They still had some guilt issues to work through, which we hear about in the next chapter, when Jesus met them on the beach, but in that moment of him appearing and proving his resurrection, there was great joy; and in their rejoicing, their fear was being defeated.

Then he breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” We mostly use this passage to teach the Office of the Keys, how Jesus gives authority to the Church to forgive and retain sins, but before we get to that, there’s a Pentecost thing going on here for the disciples. They actually received the gift of the Holy Spirit that night; the breath of God entered into them. Jesus breathing his Spirit on them that evening was working to defeat their fear.

For a moment, let’s reflect on the Acts reading. Just before it begins, the apostles had been preaching in Jesus’ name, and in a fit of jealousy, the high priest had them arrested and thrown in jail and told them not to preach Jesus anymore. Then during the night, an angel of the Lord set them free and gave them instructions to go to the temple and preach the whole message of life, so they went and did as they’d been told.

Today’s reading picks up that event as the apostles had been brought back to the high priest for further questioning, and we can tell by the conversation that these men had been changed. They were no longer hiding behind locked doors ‘for fear of the Jews;’ instead they were out there, willingly disobeying the high priest’s instructions and obeying God’s command to preach the good news of Jesus Christ.

What happened that changed them? The obvious thing, they’d received the Holy Spirit when Jesus breathed on them that fearful night, and on the day of Pentecost, and sure enough, that’s what changed them, but how did it change them?

It’s also very helpful to see how ‘fear’ gets mentioned in the book of Acts. It appears five times. The first time is in 2:43 where: “Fear came upon

everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the Apostles.”

The second and third times are in Acts 5; the story of Ananias and Sapphira, whom we’re told “lied to the Holy Spirit;” and because of that, they were both struck dead; and verse 11 says: “Great fear seized the whole Church and all who heard these things.” Then 9:31 says: “The Church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.”

The last reference is in 19:17. When some Jewish exorcists tried to use Jesus’ name to drive a demon out of a man, the evil spirit manifested and said: “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you? Then the evil spirit set upon them, and they fled from the house naked and wounded. And verse 17 says: “When this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, fear fell on them all, and the name of Jesus was praised.”

Those five accounts tell us what happened to the apostles. The ‘fear of God’ had replaced their ‘fear of the Jews,’ and as that happened, the church grew in numbers, praising God in Jesus Christ.

So, we started off in Jerusalem, with the apostles gathered together in a locked room for fear of the Jews, and as the Holy Spirit worked, their fear of human beings was cast out, and the holy and righteous fear of God took root in them, and as faith grew and spread, the church grew numerically. That’s a wonderful demonstration of Easter working out amongst God’s people as he brought his church to life and caused faith in Jesus Christ to spread far and wide across the earth, and come all the way to us in our time and place, and praise the Lord for that!

The fear of God! We struggle to understand how that works sometimes. People often ask “How can we love God and fear him at the same time? If we fear him, how can we love him?” Luther didn’t have a problem with that. He began each explanation of the 10 commandments with those very words: “We are to fear and love God.” We can very simply explain that paradox by saying, the sinner we are fears God, on account of our sin; and

the saint we are, by faith in Jesus Christ, loves God for all of his goodness to us. If we don't fear God, then we can never truly love him.

Which brings us to another scene—which is you and me and all the church throughout the world today, gathered on the first day of the week for worship. What are the things we fear today? A lot of us fear for the future of the church. Will it still be here to teach the faith to our children's children, and their children? Some of us fear we might be the last generation of church in Australia. Some of us fear how continuing debates around ordination might develop and what it will mean for the church. Others fear Islam, and extremist terrorism. Others fear the pandemic, and what it might mean for the future.

As we fear these things, the devil robs us of the power Christ came to give us.

In these difficult days, how many of us really fear God?

I leave you with that magnificent verse in Acts 9:31 “The Church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” And may the divine and holy fear of the Lord keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen!