

April 26, 2009

The Third Sunday of Easter, Year B (Luke 24:36b-48)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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It is funny how themes can leap off the page of our lectionary texts when we're least expecting them but perhaps most in need. For the last several weeks, beginning with Easter, we have seen fear running through our Gospel readings.

The disciples were so frightened by the implications of what Jesus was predicting in his own passion that they tried to stop it. And when that didn't work, they lied or fled and disappeared in order to escape their own fear of the unknown.

The women at the tomb were terrified by the implications of the angelic figure that appeared to them. They were frightened by his message, too, that Jesus was gone, and just as he had said, he had risen. The world had changed, the finite had become infinite, the certain uncertain.

Last week, the disciples were hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews who might hunt them down and persecute them for their involvement with Jesus. Their future was uncertain since Jesus' death. They didn't know what was ahead of them and were terrified by what could happen if they ventured out into the world.

In our Gospel reading this morning from Luke, Jesus appears to his friends and says, "Peace be with you". And they were startled and terrified. Startled and terrified, in fact, as if they had seen a ghost. Like the women before them, the disciples had begun to re-order their world according to the reality at hand: Jesus was dead, human evil had won. But now, this. Alive? The world had changed; they were on the precipice of something they did not understand that was greater even than they had imagined. They were terrified.

We are still in the season of Easter, in the midst of the great fifty days of this celebration. And it is a celebration, of course, celebrating life over death and good over evil. God wins. This time and every time. Surely that is worth celebrating.

So why is fear standing out so much this year? Perhaps because we humans have the uncanny ability to hear what we need to hear from the central text and teachings of our faith. There is a lot of fear in the world right now, a lot of people terrified by the future and the uncertainty, a lot of worlds have been upended.

We are all a little terrified and so it is comforting to know that the disciples, those upon whom we model our ways of moving through the world, they were terrified, too.

It happens that I have been thinking and talking a lot about funerals over the last couple of weeks. Our Kerygma class explored the Episcopal funeral service as an outline for hope in scripture. Recently, I spoke with the family of a woman who is dying, and talked about the celebration of life and eternal life that inextricable from the way the service is put together.

Funeral talk this close to Easter reminds me even more of how wonderful and lovely our funeral service is. It IS a celebration, every time. Not a celebration of the life that is now gone, but a celebration of the resurrection. In many ways, our funeral is, just like our Easter liturgy, everything that Christianity is about: hope, the conquering of evil, the promise of abundant life, even when life as we know it is over. Our funeral service is a celebration of the person that has gone on to eternal life but also a celebration of the gift that is given to us all when we believe. Our funeral service is a feast of Alleluias, regardless of the situation or the time of year. It is a service we should be proud of having in our Book of Common Prayer.

But...

This is all well and good, but even when we believe that, deeply and truly believe in the resurrection, fear is a totally appropriate response. The disciples were terrified by the changes taking place all around them. They were scared of their own loss of control and of the great unknown that stretched out before them when Christ appeared with those simple words: Peace be with you.

Peace? Hardly! The world as they knew it had been upended again and again and again as God continued to work all around them. I doubt they felt at peace and I don't blame them for feeling terrified.

The journey into the unknown is not ever a comfortable one for us fragile humans. Even those of us who profess to thrive on excitement and adventure like some sense of comfort, some sense of stability in the midst of the chaos.

Everyone has had the experience of leaving something known and heading into the unknown. Perhaps you have left a job or left home for college, you've left a relationship or moved away from a beloved neighborhood. Leaving is hard, even when the situation left behind is not ideal. There is comfort in that which is known. And that is why fear is a natural human emotion. It can protect us and, in small amounts, keep us from harming ourselves and making rash decisions.

It is a natural animal emotion, too. Our family recently got to play voyeur to a mother robin sitting on a nest of eggs on our front porch. We watched the three eggs hatch and watched the mother nourish the peeping babies into maturity. One morning, we noticed that two of the teenage birds were gone. Only one

remained, screeching, apparently terrified by the thought of jumping out and finding his own way. The next day, he was gone, finally having decided to take that leap of faith.

So it is with us. The journey from this life to the next life is a journey into the unknown. Like any journey into that which we cannot see or understand, it is incredibly scary. The idea of the resurrection, the knowledge, deep in our souls, that death isn't the end of this, that we are headed to a place where there is no pain or grief but life eternal, that knowledge can mitigate some of our fear but I doubt if it ever goes away. We're humans, we fear what we do not understand.

Fear is a natural, human response to the unknown. Fear is okay. It is okay to hesitate and to think, to regroup, to pause. There is, my friends, a place for fear in the kingdom of God.

But it is not okay to stay there. It is not okay to use fear to motivate us to hate or persecute, to betray one another or hide behind locked doors forever. It is not okay to let fear stop us from hearing and spreading the message of "Peace be with you".

It is not okay to give in to fear, to stop there. We are humans, yes, but we are humans created in the image of a great and loving God, a God who wants more for us than just fear and has provided such. There is more to the human experience. If we stop at fear, we're robbing ourselves of the ability to love one another, to learn, to grow and experience freedom. In short, when we stop at fear, we deny ourselves the ability to live. Life abundant, life eternal - both are meaningless if you are dying terrified everyday.

The disciples did not stop at terrified. If they had, chances are we wouldn't be here now. Even amidst their confusion, they cooked some breakfast and had a meal. They listened and learned and let their minds be opened. They enjoyed the presence of the one they loved so much.

Then they unlocked the door, went out into the world, and spread the Gospel. We are invited to do the same.