



Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
April 26, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Two men were talking about the pandemic and one said, “I’m not afraid of COVID, I have the cure.” The other guy said, “the cure, what are you talking about?”

“Oh, I just drink Jack Daniels whiskey.”

“I don’t believe it, how can whiskey kill a virus?”

“It doesn’t kill the virus but it sure kills the fear.”

Fear has become a constant companion during this age of plague. Hopefully, you are not experiencing uncontrolled terror, but I think most of us are experiencing a constant, low level anxiety and fear that is with us on a daily basis. There’s a lot to be concerned about: each trip to the grocery store or a doctor’s office raises the question of how best to keep one’s self safe; the economic impacts of this pandemic are getting worse and growing deeper; and even if we, as individuals, are relatively insulated from the worst aspects of the crisis, many of us have family, friends, and loved ones who are working in necessary roles or struggling with unemployment, and we can’t help but fear for them.

We don’t always notice it, but fear is also a constant companion in the resurrection stories in the Gospels – including the one we read today, about Jesus’ appearance on the road to Emmaus. In almost every account of the resurrection the disciples’ first response is fear – and rightly so; we generally expect dead people to stay dead. In addition, the disciples were also afraid of what was coming next – it makes sense to be afraid of what the authorities and the mob might do to you if you were a known follower of someone they had just crucified.

One of the reasons I chose to use today’s clip from the children’s movie *The Miracle Maker* is because it does a good job of capturing those elements of fear that are somewhat subtle in the Gospel texts themselves. As you just saw, it does so by combining last week’s reading with this week’s reading. Why does the scene

open with the disciples crowded together in one room? Because they are afraid – they are hiding out together from the mobs that lynched Jesus. Why does Thomas so stridently doubt the others' accounts of the resurrection? Because he is afraid – afraid to believe that such good news could be true. The movie also, I think, does a good job of capturing the fear and wonder of encountering the risen Jesus with the way the animation of the meal at Emmaus uses light and shadow, the expressions of the characters, and the tone and volume of the background music to convey both excitement and fear.

I was especially interested in the bit of creative license they took with regard to the two men traveling to Emmaus – they tell the stranger who joins them on the road that they have sent the women and children on ahead to Emmaus for safety and are now traveling to rendezvous with them there. I think that's a fair interpretation of Luke's resurrection story: the meeting with Jesus takes place because this particular group of disciples is fearfully trying to sneak out of town and avoid the authorities of whom they are rightly afraid.

To the extent that we are, in our circumstances, experiencing fear, we are in good company – we are in company with the prophets, apostles, and martyrs of our faith, who know what it is like to live through scary times of instability and crisis. Fear is not a sin, in fact, it is a healthy and necessary response for survival. In many situations, including our present pandemic, if you're not a little bit afraid you're not paying attention and you may take unnecessary risks.

The sin, if you will – or perhaps we should say, the problem – enters in when we allow fear to control us. It's easy to do and it's understandable, but it ultimately doesn't help the situation if we allow fear to consume us. At a certain point we have to master our fear and use our fear as an important source of information to help us make wise decisions rather than allowing it to simply drive us wildly in scattered directions.

Today's story of the resurrection helps us see how we might do that. In our story, Luke tells us that Jesus was revealed to them in the breaking of the bread. It's at that moment, when they meet Jesus, that their fear stops controlling them. The fear doesn't go away but now, instead of allowing fear to control them, they are using fear as source of information to help them make wise decisions. On any other third Sunday of Easter I might talk about how meeting Jesus in the breaking of bread is a reference to the Eucharist, but since we have been temporarily exiled from the Eucharist, I want to focus on how meeting Jesus in the breaking of bread is about communion in its largest sense.

Yes, communion is about the bread and wine, the altar and the prayers. But communion is also about a phone call, an email, a text, a zoom meeting, or a FaceTime session, a Facebook post, a letter, or a card in the mail. Communion is the cure for fear because it is in communion with God and with each other that we meet the risen Jesus and receive from his Holy Spirit the hope and faith to put our fear in perspective.

We cannot, at the moment, break bread together at the altar, but we do have the means to put a loved one on speaker phone or on a Facetime session while we eat and they eat. We do have the means to reach out to each other by all sorts of technology – both old, like the phone, and new, like Zoom – and find the words of faith and love by which we may encourage each other to see where Jesus is present, even in the midst of our fear. Communion is taking place and can continue to take place, and therefore Jesus continues to be revealed to us, moment by moment even in the midst of this crisis.

We will know that we have met him when our fear is in a proper perspective – not gone, not ignored, but put into its proper place as a source of information with which to make wise decisions. We will know that we have met him when we experience that deep and abiding reassurance that everything is going to be okay, even if we must suffer for a little while. We will know that we have met Jesus when that divine presence that is beyond our own minds and souls speaks to the depth of our souls and says simply, “peace be with you.”

My prayer for us this third week of Easter comes from the words of today’s collect: “O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work, and may deeply experience the peace and freedom from fear that only he can give; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.