



***The Resurrection Power::***  
**“CONQUERING THE FINAL FEAR!”**

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Scripture: John 20:19-23

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were 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 side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”*

*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*

Many years ago, I saw an interview on television with a fellow who was over 90 years old. He played center field for this senior adult softball team down in Florida. It’s part of the “Super Senior Softball League.” I’m sure you’ve heard of them; they call their 80-year-old rookies “the kids.” Anyway, this interviewer asked this 93-year-old man how he had lived so long and stayed in such good shape. I’ll never forget his response. He smiled into the camera and said: “My mother makes me get out of bed every morning and get out of the house.”

Well, you don’t have to be over 90 to know that’s good advice. I’m 64 and some days it’s hard for me to get out of the house. There are mornings when I am sorely tempted to turn off my phone, lock the doors, pull the covers over my head, and hide. You ever feel that way? Sometimes the world is just too much for us. That’s one reason we need our homes, a safe haven away from the storms raging outside. On the other hand, if you are going to accomplish anything, whether it’s making the world safe for democracy or winning a softball game in the Super Seniors League, you’ve got to get out of the house to do it. And you know, that’s good advice for the church to remember, too.

Those first disciples certainly were candidates for this advice. Today’s passage takes us back to Easter, the first day of the week. The news has broken, but where are the disciples? They’ve locked the doors, closed the shutters, and quiver like yellow Jell-O with every knock at the door or noise from the street. They’re hiding out for fear. They’re smart enough. They saw what happened to Jesus. Nails in his hands, a spear in his side, his corpse thrown in a cave, and then, who knows, stolen maybe? They are so afraid that instead of doing the sensible thing, dispersing

and running their separate directions to find protection, they stick together. Yet they are too paralyzed to move. And it's pretty clear: they can't do a blessed thing unless Jesus is with them.

Then suddenly – in a breath, in a heartbeat, in the blink of an eye – Jesus *is* with them. And what does he say? “Shalom! Peace be upon you.” Edmund Steimle, who taught preaching at Union Seminary, points out how in every gospel the first word at Easter is not “Rejoice!” but “Fear not!” “Calm down.” “Be at peace!” “Shalom aliechem!” That first Easter brought awe, amazement, terror, alarm. Yet Mark says the first response to the resurrection was fear.

They had good reason to be scared witless because the impossible had happened. They all fly against the wall in shock and surprise, staring at the unbelievable, too scared to breathe. You'd think it was the Night of the Zombies if a person you knew to be dead walked up to you when the sun had set and doors were locked, tapped you on the shoulder and said, “Peace!”

That same day the disciples gathered like we gather here, in an upper room, locked in by our fears, uncertain what we should do next, when suddenly Jesus was there with them. “Peace be upon you,” he said. Actually this was a common greeting. It's used in Israel to this day: “Shalom aliechem!” They say it like we say “Hi!” In Israel if you bump into a friend, or you drive up to the McDonalds, you say “Shalom aliechem!”

Yet even the people who knew Jesus best, who had listened to him at his knee, were in a process of learning what it really meant for them that he is alive. Because before they were convinced of this, they were hiding under the very tables at which they had shared a last supper with him. They were scared that the very thing that had happened to Jesus would happen to them. Death. They were surprised at how rabid the crowds had become, shocked at how quickly they had turned on Jesus, how suddenly fear had driven them to violence. They were scared to death. Until Jesus suddenly was with them and told them “Shalom. Shalom aliechem!” “Peace be upon you!” And what's the next thing he tells them? Receive the Holy Spirit and forgive. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.” And then they knew their savior lived.

And let's be honest: you and I are no better than those early disciples. Because we do not know that our Savior lives, we often live our lives in fear. The greatest fear, of course, is the fear of death. Many people who finally come around and speak to me about spiritual matters do so because they are afraid. They're afraid of so many things, but most often it is because they're afraid of dying. The Apostle Paul wrote, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So, he wrote, “We do not grieve as those who have no hope.” Jesus said, “Do not be anxious about your life.” John Wesley once said, “Whatever else may be said of these Methodists, they die well.” Such a strange statement. But what he meant was, they were not afraid. They had so experienced God's love that death had lost its power over them.

Yet, truth be known, we're more like the disciples hiding under the tables than like the early Methodists. For two reasons: we're scared of death – and often don't think about it until it's about to hit us over the head – and we have not experienced God's love so powerfully that it has

cast out our fear. Perfect love, God's love, casts out fear, yet we're afraid of life, afraid to forgive, afraid to live.

Last Thursday, our Compass Committee Chair, Eric Pelton, gave a devotion from J. B. Phillips' little book, "Your God Is Too Small!" We suffer from that. Our biggest limitation is our seriously stunted vision of God. We are not convinced about the unconditional power and love of God. But if Christ is risen, and God is greater than the ruling Sanhedrin, mightier than the Roman army, bigger even than death, all our excuses are swept away. It means, any dream God gives us, God has the power to do. Kind of scary, isn't it? Maybe we should lock the doors.

As I think about it, perhaps there is a deeper fear at work when it comes to the risen Christ, deeper even than our fear of death. I'm talking about our fear of life. For if Jesus has conquered death and is alive and among us, all bets are off and we are at his mercy. Who knows what demands he might make of us? Who knows what crosses he might expect us to bear? He may actually want us to love others unconditionally just as he loved us. And if he holds us to his commandment to love, who knows what changes we would have to make in how we live? And how can we say no?

Dr. Fred Craddock tells of a minister who was so frustrated with the lethargy in his congregation, one Sunday in the worship service he said, "Why don't we all form a circle, hold hands and attempt to communicate with the living?" Well, that's not our problem here, is it? But our fear of death is a protection, a comfort somehow. It gives us an excuse to hide out and do less. Because we might fail, we don't even try. Because we might lose, we don't ever risk. Because we might suffer, we don't sacrifice to attempt something great for God. When we're scared of death, we're afraid to live. It's easier to huddle in the upper room and worry over how to arrange the furniture.

Of course, it won't do us any good to hide. Jesus will be appear in our midst anyway, saying "Shalom Aliechem!", dispelling our fears, renewing our faith, and showing us the greatness of God. But life is scary and we forget, so we need this place and we need each other, and if you try to go it alone, you won't get very far.

Friends, I want you to see something this morning: Jesus comes first to the community. Jesus first appears where two or three have gathered in his name. When we come here on the first day of the week, wounded by the struggles and failures and griefs of the week, weighed down by our weariness with well-doing, paralyzed by our own fear and failures and distance from God, the risen Christ comes to us to offer peace. That's why every Sunday in Christian worship, we don't just celebrate Easter; we experience it. The risen Christ is with us. Thank God he is with us because we can't do a blessed thing without him.

There's a word for the church here for those who have ears to hear. The worst mistake we can make is to ignore our need for one another. I have seen it so many times. A person faces a crisis. A family goes through some trauma. An illness, a job loss. And what do they do? They draw back from the church as if it's some type of failure that things aren't "perfectly fine" with them. Maybe they're embarrassed, or maybe they don't know how to reach out for the help they need. Maybe they think they should only give and that it's a sin to receive. But instead of staying connected to their community of faith, and receiving the rich resources of Christian love and

compassion, they withdraw and hide – and we let them. We need to let the church be the church. We need to receive the help and support of others just as we're so willing to provide it to others. If you have a need, a crisis, health-related or otherwise, please let one of your pastors know, or a member of our Care Team – or simply reach out to someone here. Christ calls us together and comes among us for good reason: we need one another.

Christ has given us to one another to strengthen each other to live as he taught – to live without fear, and as we heard in our passage today, to be able to have the strength to forgive. Time passes so fast. I am surprised that it will be ten years this coming October when a severely disturbed individual seized an Amish schoolhouse, released the boys, and then shot and killed five little Amish girls and wounded five others. The pictures in the newspaper of small clusters of young Amish women standing, pondering – hand in hand – the evil that had happened, were extraordinary, unforgettable.

I remember being moved to tears by the witness of faith given by that Amish community. Sister Joan Chittister wrote at the time, “It was not the violence suffered by the Amish that stunned people – it was that the Amish community simply refused to hate what had hurt them.”

An Amish grandfather, standing at the foot of one of the graves, said, “Do not think evil of this man.” A delegation of Amish visited the family of the killer, who killed himself at the end of the rampage, and said to them, “Do not leave. Stay in your home here.”

“It was not the violence that shocked us,” Joan Chittister wrote. “It was the forgiveness that followed it for which we were not prepared. It was the lack of recrimination, the dearth of vindictiveness, that left us amazed. Baffled. Confounded. It was the Christianity we all profess but which they practiced that left us stunned. Never had we seen such a thing.”

Only when you know your Savior lives can you resist returning evil for evil. Only when you know your Savior lives can you be so unafraid of death for yourself or one you love. Only when you know your Savior lives can you face the tests of life which will show who you really are. Only when we know our Savior lives can we have such peace in the midst of life's brokenness. Jesus stands in our midst still and says, “Peace be upon you!” May we receive that peace, and live as the fearless and forgiving people Jesus means us to be. Amen.