

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?”
Psalm 16, I Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31
April 18 & 19, 2020

“One of the most moving passages in English literature comes toward the end of Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, a story of the French revolution. Each day, a grim procession of prisoners made its way on the streets of Paris to the guillotine. One prisoner, Sidney Carton, a brave man who had once lost his soul but had now found it again, was now giving his life for his friend. Beside him there was a young girl. They had met before in the prison, and the girl had noticed the man's gentleness and courage. She said to him, "If I may ride with you, will you let me hold your hand? I am not afraid, but I am little and weak, and it will give me more courage."

“So they rode together, her hand in his; and when they reached the place of execution, there was no fear in her eyes. She looked up into the quiet composed face of her companion and said, "I think you were sent to me by heaven."

“In all the dark valleys of life, God our Father, the God of all comfort, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, is at our side.” (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003] 42)

But there are times when we doubt this fact. There are days in all of our lives when the most horrible stuff happens, and we wonder where God is. We become so consumed with the worries and sorrows and fears of this world that we miss the presence of Jesus at our side. We press on ahead, or we isolate ourselves and we go off in our own strength, missing the power and confidence and authority for us through Jesus, and we wonder why we are so tired, why we are so angry, and why we are so unproductive. If we forget that Jesus is right there at our side, our whole world falls apart and we shrink into scared, anxious, powerless people.

And we see that in our Gospel lesson today. It was the day after Sabbath, Sunday that we call Easter, and the women had already gone to the tomb, seen Jesus risen from the dead, reported back to the disciples, Peter and John had already checked out the empty tomb, too, and where do we find the followers of Jesus at the end of the day? Listen to the Gospel lesson today of John 20:19-31. (READ

John 20:19-31)

Even after many eye witnesses have seen the risen Lord Jesus, where are the disciples of Jesus? They “*were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities*” (20:19). Mary and the other women had seen the risen Lord Jesus. They had touched him. Peter had his own encounter with Jesus that we find only referenced in Luke 24:34. Cleopas and his friend who were walking to Emmaus had seen Jesus and had talked with Him much of the afternoon. They only recognized Him as they sat down for supper and Jesus said grace and broke bread. But here they are, locked up in a room by themselves for fear that they, too, might face the same kind of persecution and torture that Jesus went through. Fear had crippled them and stalled them to the point of paralysis.

You see, the last week’s events were still so raw in their minds that they couldn’t let it go. They had seen Jesus arrested, tortured, crucified and buried. And so not even Jesus’ isolated appearances changed the hearts of the disciples. Jesus had appeared to “a few others” so the rest were still skeptical. They were now in information overload and their minds were slow to process all that had happened. Once more they had forgotten Jesus’ words of preparation, that He would be arrested, tried, beaten, crucified and buried, **BUT** on the third day rise again. No one had ever done that before, so it was difficult for them to fully understand.

So, knowing that His disciples needed a jump-start to get them going again, Jesus does this marvelous thing – He appears to them right there in the locked room where they were hiding out. And the very first words out of His mouth are, “*Peace be with you*” (John 20:19). He knew their troubled minds! He knew their fears! He knew the difficulty they were having understanding what they were going through! And He says, “Peace come into your lives right now.”

You see, without peace in our lives, we begin to make some very awkward and embarrassing decisions, often to our own detriment. When peace is not in our lives, we become consumed with all the negative stuff that causes our hearts to race and our minds to worry. And studies have shown that in extremely stressful conditions, people can actually die from fright and stress.

“During the January 17, 1994 Northridge/Los Angeles earthquake, over one hundred Californians literally died of fright, according to Robert Kloner, cardiologist at the Good Samaritan Hospital in L.A. His research has shown that excessive fear can cause sudden cardiac death. In many cases the terrorized brain triggers the release of a mix of chemicals so potent it causes the heart to contract so fiercely it never relaxes again.

“In a Cleveland study, coroners studied the hearts of 15 assault victims who died even though their assailants had not wounded them badly enough to fatally injure their internal organs. Charles Hirsch, once the chief medical officer for New York City, determined that 11 of the 15 had torn fibers and lesions in their hearts most likely caused by mortal fear.

“Neurologist Martin A. Samuels of Harvard Medical School in Boston, who has done research in this area, tells of his cat coming across a field mouse. The cat simply put its paw on the mouse's tail and batted it about a bit. Within 20 minutes the mouse died despite having no serious injuries. "Animals commonly drop dead under these circumstances," says Samuels. Fear is equally dangerous to a person's spiritual life.” (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2002] pg. 94)

Jesus knew the condition of His disciples and His followers. He knew that unless they were able to see Him alive again, all of them together, they could literally die from fear that had captivated them. So it is appropriate that His first words to them were “Peace be with you.” Jesus wanted their hearts to relax, their minds to be cleared from worry and fear, and their bodies to recover their normal rhythms. Yes, it had been a tremendous shock for all of them, both to see Jesus die, and then to see Jesus alive again, so it was absolutely essential that peace came into their lives. So after they all got a good look at Him, head to toe, Jesus offers peace to them a second time so that they could completely relax in His presence.

You see, once we become paralyzed in fear, we can no longer do anything for the Lord. Once we are surrounded and encapsulated by fear, we are incapable of doing anything worthwhile. And the only way for us to eliminate the fear in our lives is through the power of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus

breathes on His disciples and followers and tells them, “*Receive the Holy Spirit...*” (Jn. 20:22). Only by the power of the Holy Spirit can we defeat fear, so we must receive Him into our lives and allow Him to empower us over fear so that we are not debilitated.

It is interesting that Jesus then instructs the disciples and followers to forgive one another. “*If you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven*” (20:22). Jesus said this to get these men and women to forgive the religious leaders of what they had done to Him. Still they had not understood that Jesus had to die on the cross in order to pay the debt for the sins of the people of the world. Forgiveness of sins releases us from any fear that comes to us through the sins that have been committed toward us. By forgiving the sins of the religious leaders and the Roman government for sending Jesus to the cross, the disciples and followers of Jesus could let go of their fear of what might happen to them by these two groups. And if they did not forgive the Jewish authorities and the Romans, that fear of them would continue to reign in their hearts, bringing incapacitation to not only their lives, but to their spirits, too. That would leave them completely incapable of doing anything for the Lord Jesus. It would completely paralyze the Christian movement from that point on.

We’re not told how the ones who saw Jesus that night responded to His telling them to receive the Holy Spirit and to forgive those who had sinned against them. That comes later in Acts 2. But the assumption is that these folks gathered there in the room were reassured and empowered to find peace in their lives as they began to look at the whole situation differently. We’re not told how long Jesus stayed with them that night.

Now, the Gospel lesson moves right on to look at the fact that one of the 12, Thomas, was not with the rest in the place where Jesus met the other disciples and followers. We’re not told why, but he was not there with the others. What we do know is that Thomas missed it. So when Thomas hears about Jesus’ visit to the rest of His followers, I am certain that there was some jealousy in him. He was not there to receive the peace that Jesus gave to the rest, so his mind is still cowering with fear. So when he hears the great news of Jesus appearance to the rest, Thomas makes a grand statement, “I will not

believe any of what you have said until I personally see the scars of the nails in Jesus' hands and put my finger on those scars and put my hand in His side. I need physical proof!" (Jn. 20:25 WWT). For eight agonizing days, Thomas hears about the resurrection of Jesus, but will not receive it. He's a realist who needs physical proof before he will give in to believing something that fantastic.

Aren't we the same as Thomas? Many times we cannot believe in God's deliverance or protection unless we see it for ourselves. We refuse to give ourselves permission to trust the Lord deeper without absolute certainty that what we are being told is true. So we may agree on something about Jesus, but until we actually have it happen in our own lives, we will not believe it to be true. It's just too fantastic for us and we will not be suckered by anyone!

Again, Jesus knows our hearts; He knows our situations; He knows our fears and He knows our hesitancy to believe. We'll touch more on that next week. So Jesus came to the disciples again, and this time Thomas was there with them. Upon seeing Jesus, AND upon hearing Jesus give him instructions specifically as Thomas had demanded, the physical proof is there in front of him and Thomas believes.

But once again, look at where the disciples and followers of Jesus were gathered. "*The doors were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'*" (Jn. 20:26). Despite Jesus' first visit to them, they were still gathering together behind locked doors and shuttered windows. Even after seeing Jesus over a week before, they are still scared, still stuck in their fear of what could happen to them if they dared venture out into the public.

I wonder if Jesus asked them this vital question, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" Why were they still so afraid? Because their belief and trust in Jesus was still in question. Only after this second visit by Jesus to them do we see them dare venture out to do the ministry of Jesus. Over a week had gone by and there was no movement. Jesus had to inject them once more with His encouragement in order to get them moving for Him. Maybe Thomas was holding them back with his doubt. But we see that after this second appearance to all of them, the followers of Jesus begin to get going.

Again, we aren't given much detail of that second visit by Jesus, what was said or how long He

was there with the believers. But the last verses of that wonderful chapter tells us that this time “*Jesus performed many other miracles in His disciples’ presence that are not written down*” in print, but the ones that were recorded were written so that we, too could believe in Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, and have faith and trust in Him for our own lives (Jn. 20:30-31).

Right now we have become isolated in our own homes, “behind locked doors” so to speak, and we are experiencing some of the same fears that the disciples and followers of Jesus were facing. What happens if we go out into the public? What will they do to us if we decide to gather together to worship? What do we do now in the midst of this crisis? Do I really believe that Jesus will be with me and protect me and even use me to touch the lives of others for Him through me? What if I get sick? What if I get caught? What if...? What if...? What if...?

Folks, these are certainly difficult times for us, and there are many uncertainties. It may be that we, too, are demanding physical proof from Jesus concerning His protection and presence with us. Let Jesus build your faith in Him as you begin to call out to Him and seek His reassurance in your own lives. I cannot give you faith, as much as I would like to supercharge your lives. It comes as we receive the Holy Spirit into us and believe that if Jesus has strengthened and protected so many others in the past who had trusted in Him, He will do it for us, too.

We hear it in the words of Psalm 16. Listen to these powerful words of King David. (READ Psalm 16). What wonderful words of confidence in the presence and protection of Jesus in our lives today! The Lord has promised to protect us, provide for us, guide us, walk with us, and be with us so that we can serve Him in all that we do. We don’t do anything for the Lord if we are paralyzed with fear and worry. Let the Lord show you His path that leads to life so that His presence will fill you with joy (16:11).

There was a TV commercial several years ago that demonstrates this marvelously. “The commercial begins with a young girl standing alone in a picturesque meadow. The camera then pans to another part of the field where it shows a gigantic African rhinoceros. The ominous beast begins a lethal

charge towards the girl, whose serene and happy face remains unmoved. As the rhinoceros gets closer, the words appear on the screen, 'Trust is not being afraid.' A split second before the rhino tramples the helpless child, it stops, and the girl, her smile never wavering, reaches up and pets the animal on its massive horn. The final words then appear, '...even when you are vulnerable.'" (*Perfect Illustrations*, pg. 282)

Joy is ours as we trust the Lord Jesus with our whole lives, EVEN in the most terrifying situations. We can still serve the Lord! We can still bring hope to those around us! We can still provide for the needs of those who are in want! We can still reach out to the lonely, the lost, the hurting and the grieving so that we can share out testimony of faith in Jesus and show the world what our faith can do! When Jesus asks us the question He asked the disciples, "What Are You Doing Here?" we can respond to Him, "We are serving in Your name, we are sharing our faith in You so that others can find hope and life and love and joy!"

And that is the encouragement we get from I Peter 1:3-9. Peter had seek Jesus, risen again. He had experienced Jesus' visits several times, in different places. He had found the power of the Holy Spirit in his life and he had gone out to do the work of Jesus despite the demands of the Temple leaders to stop. Peter and the other disciples and followers of Jesus boldly went out and turned the world up-side-down for Jesus and transformed the world because they did not let fear rule their lives. So listen to his encouragement and challenge for us, even today. (READ I Peter 1:3-9)

This is not from a man who was ruled by fear! It was from a man who accepted Jesus into his life with the confidence that He is the Messiah, the Son of God. Peter knew that this life is temporary, but eternal life goes on from here when we have faith in Jesus. And Peter encourages us to put our faith in gear and begin living it out so that others might see it and find hope in their lives because of what they are seeing in us. Cowering at home does not send a message of hope, but only fearful compliance to the government. Peter tells us that we are to find our hope in Jesus Christ as we live boldly before those around us. Our confidence is not in the power of government, or the things of this world, or the

positions we might hold while we are here on earth. Our confidence is from the Lord Jesus Christ who has lived among us to teach us about God's love for us, and then defeated death so that we would no longer fear, but faithfully live for Him.

So I ask you boldly and blatantly, "What Are You Doing THERE?" Trust in the presence and guidance and protection of the Lord Jesus so that you might be His witnesses throughout the world. The purpose of your faith in Jesus is to shine like a blazing tree on fire for the Lord so that others might be drawn to the light of Jesus Christ through you. You can't do that by hunkering down fearful at home. Be bold. Trust Jesus' protection. Receive the Holy Spirit and get a move on to encourage others. Do it in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.