

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

Many Christian brothers and sisters, including children, were victims of a terrorist attack in Lahore Pakistan Easter Sunday, celebrating the Resurrection when a murderous bomb exploded. It happened against a backdrop of campaigning where some candidates reacted with fear mongering and casting blame. News and social media blast the headlines and terrible images to our phones, television sets, laptops and tablets, making one think that we are imminently threatened. Fear, violence, threatening news all in sound bites provide revenue for media, a profit center for corporations, and free publicity for candidates. When I turn on Facebook I'm bombarded with this stuff from people who like to send and forward the latest comment designed to provoke fear and outrage, all shared by one or another as they unwittingly join in with the politicians and fear mongers.

The thing is, when people are afraid the instinct for fight or flight kicks in. For the most part, frightened people react and don't think, even when threats are remote, and perhaps not even real. I've followed various groups on social media, including pastor groups and I see people fighting with others whom they may have never even met, on discussion threads, rude, shocking and violent things I can't imagine someone saying to another. We create our own enclaves or ghettos where we can huddle and commiserate with like-minded people and hurl disdain at those who don't agree or who aren't like us. Essentially people become paralyzed with fear.

In our gospel this morning we find that the disciples were afraid, they had much justification as outlined in Acts show. Jesus dead and buried, yet strange stories abounded that first Easter morning, an empty tomb, Jesus reported as walking around. There was real danger for these followers of Jesus, the religious authorities who had crucified Jesus might come after them. They were huddled together in a locked room for good reason, Thomas missing but we don't know why.

Then Jesus appears despite the locked door, entering the room, finding a huddled fearful group, and calms their fear. "Peace be with you," he tells them. Peace to calm fear and restore courage. Peace to replace instinctual reactions with reason and with compassion. Peace to prepare them for the incredible news. He is risen, he was dead and is alive, showing them his hands and his side. Peace to ready them for mission. "As the father has sent me, so I send you!" Peace he speaks, and breathes into them the breath of life, the Holy Spirit. God breathed into clay at the dawn of time giving life to humanity, Jesus breathes into the disciples bringing them back from fear and into the new life that he represents. He breathes the Spirit of God into the lifeless dry bones that the disciples might become the new life of his own body in the world. And as Jesus forgave, they also will forgive.

Our Lord Jesus gives peace, mission, life, the Spirit, forgiveness, and himself. So the ten disciples shared all of this with Thomas when he returned to them. But Thomas proclaims he won't believe unless he sees for himself. There are lots at stake, life and death, he doubts, but he's not alone. A week later and they're together again.

The doors shut yet Jesus stands among them, again sharing “Peace be with you.”

At any rate we’re in good company when we ourselves fall prey to fears and doubts that creep into our lives so often blasting in over the airwaves. But the truth is, this world isn’t any scarier than it ever has been. Death has always loomed over all of us but its power to affect and negate life seems to have increased not diminished. Too many live in fear and keep their heads down trying to stay out of harm’s way. And it’s not just the powerless, those with pretense to power are even more fearful but they lash out in their fear, wild threats, wild promises, brandishing death and punishment like a weapon.

So Jesus is with the disciples again speaking peace, then turning his attention to Thomas who had not been convinced. But they say seeing is believing, so Jesus shows his wounds to Thomas and tells him to touch him, to “not doubt but believe.” And Thomas answers him “My Lord and my God.” Consider now that it was skepticism that allowed Thomas to return to the disciples, to face his moment of faith. Now you and I don’t have the benefit of seeing to believe. Of course our fears often keep us from seeing even that which is right in front of us, much less believing.

But remember dear ones, Jesus’ presence isn’t missing from us, we experience him through our faith, faith passed on by Jesus from generation to generation, the gift of God by grace. We are the fearful, the lost, the hurt, in a threatening world, but Jesus is with us and through Word and Sacrament, transforms us and gifts us into his body here in this world, we become wounded healers who experience Christ even as he transforms us. We are given life. We will die in this world but as John Donne wrote in one of his sonnets:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Death is defeated, although we’re not free from its effect because we will still die. But it no longer has power over us, we are free to boldly live as Christ would have us live, as his disciples, giving ourselves as he gave himself. When you leave here this morning go and proclaim the new reality, a reality unsurpassed in breadth and scope. We, Christ’s disciples are guided on our way by faith, not fear.

We are free to see because we believe, living as we do in the space between fear and faith. But Jesus joins us there, and that makes all the difference! We are no longer prey for the manipulation of fear mongering in our world, we are free to follow a different path. To choose the path of love, serving love, for the sake of a fearful world. AMEN