

Easter 2A
Peace, Seattle
April 23, 2017
John 20:19-31

MOVING PAST FEAR

It's coded, science tells us, into our autonomic nervous system; hardwired into our brain. Two choices in response to perceived threat: fight or flight.

Only they're not really choices, because it's not really a decision we're talking about, but a reaction—aided by the near instantaneous secretion of hormones, a quickened pulse, and the acceleration of other bodily functions—which flood the body and prepare us either for fight or for flight.

But what do you do when neither fighting nor fleeing is an option?

You hunker down; you stew; and as stress levels go up your ability to be calm and circumspect goes down. It's not a happy scene. But it's the very context with which our gospel reading begins: doors locked, lookouts posted, disciples cowering in fear.

The burst of excitement that marked developments earlier in the day—the empty tomb, the discarded wrappings, Mary's vision of angels and of seeing the Lord—have taken a back seat and FEAR has come to the front to take the wheel once more.

Thoughts have turned inward, the pondering of "if only's" and "what might have beens" and regrets has begun; sins of commission and of omission, from which no relief will be forthcoming.

You can imagine the bars of their self-inflicted prisons materialize before your very eyes.

But just as they do, he does. He comes.

And the first words out of his mouth are not: I TOLD YOU SO or WHY DIDN'T YOU BELIEVE ME! or YOU UNFAITHFUL, COWARDLY, DENYING INGRATES! **But ...PEACE BE WITH YOU. Shalom! And then he shows them his hands and his side.**

There are many gospel stories for which I am personally grateful, stories in which Jesus embraces our humanity and his own; but none for which I am more grateful than this—Jesus bearing his scars without words, without commentary; letting each fearful disciple clustered around him look and absorb what they see.

"Our human condition," writes Jose' Luis Descalzo, "is to be maimed; nobody lives for very long without losing some dream or other. There are times when it seems as if fate is being especially cruel; today we lose a hand, tomorrow a hope, the next day one of the mainstays on which our very existence depended, or seemed to."¹

What the gospel tells us is that there is another hand—a wounded hand—reaching back toward our own.

¹ Jose' Luis Martin Descalzo, *Reasons for Hope*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) p. 86.

It's as if the risen One is saying to us:

YOUR INJURIES—WHATEVER THEIR ORIGIN AND WHEREVER THEY RESIDE IN YOU;
YOUR FEARS, YOUR MAIMINGS, HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMED NOW, BY THESE WOUNDS.

Seeing those places where the nails pierced his hands and feet and the spear pierced his side, our eyes are opened, and we recognize him as our Lord and rejoice.

He shows us his wounds. And this revelation becomes for the disciples, for us, not simply the source of his identity, but also the resource for our transformation; for our own resurrection.

And there is so much that needs to be healed, so many wounds in our lives and world. How do we wrap our heads around it all?

In a scene from the film, BOYCOTT,² two figures stand together outside a Montgomery, Alabama, home and watch it burn, knowing there's nothing they can do to stop it. As the flames rise higher we see the home's owner, civil rights leader E. D. Nixon and Martin Luther King, Jr. with him. They are not the only ones watching. Firefighters from the local fire department are there, too. Leaning against their trucks, they do not lift a finger against the fire.

Nixon asks King how he can stick to nonviolent principles—or even if he should—as he and his family are physically threatened and attacked by the powers that oppose them.

King doesn't answer him directly. Instead, speaking slowly as though it pains him to do so, he [recites a verse] from the letter to the Hebrews: "But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved."³

I was at the Seattle Science March yesterday—along with several others of you from this congregation—and thousands upon thousands of new friends.

The SPIRIT among those who came to march—who hailed from every scientific discipline and age group—was what I would call cool-headed defiance; of refusing to shrink back or to be sidelined, diminished, de-funded or destroyed.

It was impressive to see so many people from such an incredible variety of disciplines and walks of life lifting their voices together. Speakers connected the dots between a society's robust commitment to science and science education, and Earth-sustaining and health-sustaining outcomes.

Galileo Galilei, the brilliant Italian scientist who was declared a heretic by the Roman Catholic Church for declaring that the earth revolved around the sun rather than the other way around, was cited by speakers and quoted on a several signs I saw.

I wore my clerical collar for the march because I wanted to communicate symbolically that the church I represented had moved beyond the reactionary adherence to entrenched positions; that religious convictions and scientific methods don't have to be mutually exclusive. None of us checked our brains at the door when we came in this morning, did we? I didn't think so.

² The description of the scene is from the film *Boycott*, about the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. It is borrowed from Ayanna Johnson Watkins' article for the 2nd Sunday of Easter in the *Living the Word* section of *Christian Century*, March 29, 2017.

³ Ibid.

This faith of ours doesn't call us to stay out of the classroom or the lab or the public square, but to engage them—and engage them boldly, using all the God-given gifts and intellect at our disposal.

As Galileo himself said:

“I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect intended us to forgo their use.”⁴ (Galileo)

The fissures, wounds, and gaps that are created when ideological positions are valued over and above hard sought wisdom cannot be healed if people go off to their separate corners and lick their wounds. We are needed, we are called, to enter the public conversation.

Not just to hoist a sign or become one more strident voice among many, but to engage in the nitty gritty details of policy and decision making; raising our voices for science-driven, peer-reviewed perspectives which, if they continue to be ignored, but life as we know it in peril.

That's the kind of spirit I detected at yesterday's march.

There's a scene in C. S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia,⁵ where the Great Lion ASLAN—after being raised to life again at the Stone Table—goes to the White Witch's castle where the victims of the White Witch's long treachery are frozen in stone.

One by one, Aslan—AHHHHHH!—breathes his breath on them, and one by one they are released from the ill magic that has kept them literally paralyzed in postures of fear.

Sisters and brothers, when we feel the breath of the Risen One blow on us, as it blew on his fearful disciples in that upper room, we find ourselves awakened, fortified, renewed; ready to resist what ill-serves our world; ready to give ourselves for what is good.

Whatever our vocation, this is the journey to which the Risen One invites us and for which he equips us, as he breathes his Spirit upon us, restoring our lives once more.

Amen.

⁴ Quoted in Des MacHale, *Wisdom* (London, 2002).

⁵ C. S. Lewis. The Chronicles of Narnia, Book 1: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.