

“From Fear to Faith”

John 20:19-23

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To say the least, this was no ordinary day for the disciples. It began with news about an empty tomb, and it ended with the disciples gathered in a house somewhere around Jerusalem to discuss it.

Earlier in the day when Mary told the disciples she had seen the Lord, it sent chills down their spine, leaving them with more questions than answers. How could this be? What did it mean? What were they to do now? How would the authorities react to this news? How would Jesus treat them since they had abandoned him in his darkest hour?

No wonder the disciples chose to be together that evening. They needed each other as they never had in order to sort out the events of the day and vent their feelings. Who would help them, though, to make sense of this day full of surprises? Little did they know it would be the very one they were discussing, the risen Lord.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together with the doors 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 side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said to them, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that, he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven,’ John 20:19-23.

Why do you think Jesus went to his disciples so quickly after the resurrection? After all, no one would have been surprised had Jesus gone to settle a score with the religious authorities who arrested him on trumped up charges, Pilate who condemned him to die, or the soldiers who abused him. Why did he seek out the disciples?

For starters, this man who died with forgiving words on his lips wasn't going to return with revenge in his heart. That would have undermined all he lived and died for, something he was unwilling to do.

Beyond this, though, he wanted to help the disciples rebuild their lives and faith. This was his priority. He knew his crucifixion ripped away everything they believed, leaving them bewildered and confused. There was no time to waste getting this process started.

So, what did Jesus do to help the struggling disciples rebuild their faith? Based upon our text, he addressed their most urgent need, which was to help them deal with their grief, their guilt and their fear.

Up to this point, only Mary had seen Jesus and talked to him. The disciples' most recent memory of Jesus was watching the soldiers take him out of the Garden of Gethsemane. Some of them may have risked getting close enough to the cross to watch him die but not close enough to be identified as one of his disciples. As a result, they were still reeling in grief and despair in spite of what Mary had told them.

They needed a personal encounter, too. They needed to know that evil in its rawest and most violent form did not have the final word in Jesus' life, as they feared it had.

There was only one way to assure them evil did not have this kind of power, and that was for Jesus to appear in their midst alive and healed. This was why Jesus showed them his nailed scarred hands and his side which had been pierced with a sword. He wanted them to be absolutely certain the one who had been treated like a criminal and crucified three days earlier was standing in front of them completely healed.

Why did Jesus appear to the disciples the same day God raised him from the dead? He loved them too much to let them wander hopelessly through the cemetery of broken dreams. **He was as anxious to turn their grief to joy as he had done for Mary earlier that day.**

Jesus also wanted his followers to know he cared for them even though they had abandoned him the night he was arrested and the next day when he was crucified. The resurrected Jesus was still their Good Shepherd, something they needed to know before they tried to sleep another night.

You can imagine how guilty the disciples must have felt for acting like cowards and forsaking him when he needed them most. Hearing he had been raised from the dead might not have brought as much joy to their hearts at first as you would think.

His last memories of them were anything but fond and pleasant. Safe to say Jesus' final hours were not the disciples finest. They were guilty of betrayal, denial and abandonment.

Would Jesus be angry with them? Would he retaliate? Would he give them a piece of his mind and have nothing else to do with them?

Maybe this is why the first words he spoke to them were, "Peace be with you." He wanted to put their hearts and minds at ease. **He was not coming to them in anger but unconditional love, eager to replace their guilt with peace of mind.**

It is also why he talked about the power of forgiveness that evening. As he had forgiven the disciples for their behavior during his arrest and crucifixion, so should they forgive those who let them down. The future of their relationships depended upon receiving and granting forgiveness.

There was something else Jesus needed to do for his disciples that night as he helped them to rebuild their lives and faith. **He needed to empower them to leave that room so they would return to the work Jesus had begun with them.**

While we don't know exactly where the disciples were that Easter evening, we do know they were hiding from the authorities behind locked doors. They fully expected to be arrested

as Jesus was, leaving them terribly frightened. Not for a minute did the disciples believe the authorities would be content with burying Jesus. They believed those who orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus wanted to get rid of all his followers, including them.

This was why Jesus knew the disciples needed courage from above if they were ever going to unlock that door and return to the streets and the marketplace. Their fear had to be turned to faith in a God who would never abandon them, but who would strengthen them for every trial or challenge.

“Receive the Holy Spirit,” Jesus said to the disciples as he breathed on them, reminiscent of God’s breathing life into the first human in Genesis 2:7. Pentecost in the Fourth Gospel came early.

Why did Jesus appear to the disciples on the evening of that first Easter? He knew fear, evil’s most potent weapon, had already found them, and he did not want to wait another day to give them the gift of the Spirit who would keep them from being controlled by it.

What a difference Jesus made in their lives that evening when he appeared in their midst. **He turned their grief into gladness, their guilt into peace of mind and their fear into courage.**

I wonder how many gathered in this room today need Jesus to do for them what he did for the disciples that night. At times, all of us struggle with grief, guilt and fear. We, too, can be broken by the harshness of life and our faith can be shattered.

Has this happened to you? If so, Jesus understands and is as anxious to help you rebuild your life and faith as he was the disciples. I hope you will let him.

Who needs your help this week putting their life and faith back together? How can God work through you and me to help them deal with their disappointment, confusion, doubts, grief, anger, fear, guilt, or shame?

Why not do what Jesus did for his disciples? Seek them out as Jesus did his disciples. Listen to their story, the source of their pain. Show them your scars and be transparent about

your own struggles. Invite them into your circle of friends where they will find acceptance, companionship and encouragement.

This, I believe, is what it means to be Easter people. If Jesus was in the business of helping people rebuild their lives and faith, why shouldn't we be?

I like the way psychotherapist Gary Neuman puts it. "We heal through loving connections. Every time we hurt or feel we can't go on, it's someone reaching out to us and connecting with us that makes the difference. Love, no matter how it is offered or when it comes, can build a bridge to something better."

Jesus built that bridge to the disciples on Easter evening replacing grief with joy, guilt with peace and fear with faith.

Who needs you to build a bridge toward them today across which they can walk to a new and better life? Will you reach out to them?

Who is building that bridge to you this morning? With God's help will you reach out and take their hand?