

Brutal Facts / Surprising Hope

Easter 2A - April 19, 2020

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Acts 2:14a, 22-32 – Peter’s Pentecostal Sermon (part 1). This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

Psalms 16 – Protect me O God, for in you I take refuge.

1 Peter 1:3-9 – Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

John 20:19-31 – 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. Doubting Thomas: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” 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.”

Today’s post is a bit of departure from usual. Instead of exegetical notes and sermon ideas, this is the text of a sermon I preached and posted in video format for a Synod Leaders to use.

You can watch a video of this sermon at <https://gulfoastsynod.org/worship-resources-april-2020/>

You can listen to the podcast here: <http://bishopmike.libsyn.com/brutal-factssurprising-hope-easter-2>

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¹⁹When 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.**" ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "**Peace be with you.** As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "**Peace be with you.**" ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus the crucified Jew, who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly.

Today's gospel reading begins on Easter evening, and concludes on the following Sunday, a week later.

It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of house where the disciples had met we locked, because of fear...

There's so much there in that one Scripture verse with which we can resonate. Again:

It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of house where the disciples had met we locked, because of fear...

What doors in your life are closed and locked because of fear?

I hope you are being kind to one another these days. Fear shuts people down. Crises tend to have an eroding effect on our spirit, and we are only a month into what could go longer. What people need right now is kindness. Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be ye kind, one unto another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you."

We are in a pandemic. Let's just name it and claim it. People are getting sick. The effects of a pandemic: Some people are dying. This causes fear and anxiety. Naming it does not give it power. It gives you power. Own it. Or as they say in the military, "Embrace the suck."

Because of the pandemic, we've been staying at home, not going out, kids taking classes online and getting bored, which means a lot of togetherness. It's easier than ever to get irritable. Easier than ever to get on one another's nerves. Domestic violence cases are up. That's not good.

Because we're staying at home, there is economic impact. Some are out of work. Businesses are struggling. Some won't make it. My 401K is now a 201K. And to top it all off there's no toilet paper at H-E-B every time I go there!

Because of all this, there is a corporate sense of grief, and a low-grade anxiety that is perfectly normal, and yet somewhat debilitating.

Owning all this is not panicking. It is being honest about where we are. The truth will set you free. The facts are your friends.

Navy Vice Admiral James Stockdale was the senior naval officer at the Hanoi Hilton. He was routinely tortured and denied medical attention. When asked how he got through this he said you have to hold two things together: You have to, on the one hand, confront the most brutal truths about your situation, while on the other hand you must never lose hope that you will prevail. He said,

You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end -- which you can never afford to lose -- with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

This is the dilemma of the disciples after the crucifixion of Jesus. They had watched the torture and brutal execution of their leader, their messiah. The one they had followed around the countryside for three years, the one who preached love of God and neighbor, was wiped out by the opposition in a bloody crucifixion. They were broken-hearted. And what's more, they were likely being hunted themselves, because when the Romans killed a messiah they usually also killed the inner circle of leaders and sometimes their families. Want to talk about afraid, anxious and feeling shame. And so they were in hiding in the upper room, behind locked doors. Their own form of self-quarantine.

Mary Magdalene and others claimed Jesus had appeared to them. It was too much to hope for. Then more of them had an epiphany of sorts, but not Thomas. He was unwilling to give in to hope. :-)

Do you ever have trouble giving in to hope? Resurrection shines its light into the darkness but you don't dare hope. Do you find yourself so used to anxiety, fear and doubt, that you can't let hope in?

1 Peter (5:8) says "Your adversary, Satan prowls like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Seeking whom he may devour." Isn't that what doubt and hopelessness feel like? And they will eat you alive.

There's nothing wrong with you. Fear and anxiety are perfectly normal. Doubt is perfectly normal. Luther said, "Only God and certain madmen have no doubts." But if you let them, doubt, fear and anxiety will consume you.

So, the disciples are hiding in the upper room. The doors are locked because of fear. This is probably the same room where Jesus celebrated his last supper with them, where he washed their feet to set an example of servanthood, and where he commanded them to love one another.

Jesus entered into their room of fear, and the first words out of his mouth were, "Peace be with you." In fact he will say these words three times in today's passage. He showed them his hands side and then again he said, "Peace be with you."

Then he breathed on them. I don't recommend you do this now! He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. As the Father has sent me so I send you." This is John's Pentecost. Pentecost in Acts was written by Luke, but for John, Pentecost takes place on the Sunday after Easter, when Jesus gives the frightened disciples the Holy Spirit and sends them out.

What turned these terrified disciples hiding in the upper room behind locked doors of fear into globetrotting apostles who are willing to give their lives for the sake of this good news? Something profound must've happened to them, it's almost as if they saw a ghost...

Thomas was not with them, and he wasn't having it. Unless I see the scars from the nails in his hands and put my hand in his side I will not believe. People wanna demonize Thomas, but you can't blame him. With all the fake news going around, he wants proof. Some say that Thomas is the patron saint of Missouri, the show me state.

Once again Jesus walked through the doors of fear and said, "Peace be with you." See me. Hear me. Touch my side. Trust me to dispel your doubt and fear. Do not doubt but believe. And Thomas said, "My God..."

Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

And then the reading ends with the first ending of John's Gospel: "Now Jesus did many more things that are not written in this book, but these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing you might have life in his name." Life with a capital L.

Conclusion

I have good news for you. Jesus drives away doubt and fear. Jesus walks through our locked doors of fear and blesses us with a peace that passes all understanding, so that we may have life abundantly.

I have good news: Psalm 46 says, “God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in time of trouble. Though the mountains quake in the heart of the sea, though the waters roar and foam, we will not fear.” Be not afraid. God is your strength.

I have good news: This is going to be really difficult. There will be loss, but I am 99% sure you will pull through it. Most won’t get infected, and for those who do, the coronavirus mortality rate is less than 1%. So 99% of those infected will pull through. The odds are in your favor. For most of us, our social distancing is not for our benefit, but for others. So have faith and hope. Trust God. **Isaiah 40** says, “Wait on the Lord, who will renew your strength, so that you will run and not be weary, walk and not faint, so you will mount your on wings like an eagle.

I have even better news. Even if you’re in the 1%, God has your back. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. You are loved with an everlasting love that is stronger than the grave. **Psalm 23** says, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup is running over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”