

“Releasing Our Fears”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
April 19, 2015 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

Many of you may know that my parents are in the process of moving. This coming Wednesday they will turn over the keys to a home that they have lived in for almost 27 years. They have many wonderful memories in this place and it has been difficult to say good-bye. Now, they love their new condominium. It offers one floor where they will no longer have to climb the dreaded steps. They no longer have to worry about who will take care of the lawn or driveway be it summer or winter! But the thing that has been the worst is they have had to “downsize”. I am finding that this is a word that is not only dreaded by my parents but by many. How many of you have had to “downsize”? How many of you need to do it but have put it off? It is a very difficult thing to do as you have to let go of things! These things hold deep sentimental value. For my parents, some of these things are all they have left of people who were close to them that have died. Some of these things are from people who live far away and my parents may never get to see again. It is difficult to let go because that is what connects them to these loved ones.

As my brothers and I have been the ones to help my parents go through this process, I think for me there is a fear as well. This is a point of transition for them. They are getting older. My hope and prayer is that they will have many years that they will enjoy this new place. Because I will be honest, I don't want to move them (again) anytime in the near future! But as my parents get older, I fear the day when they can no longer drive or when they may have to have assistance with living. These are life changes that will be difficult to face.

The disciples had to face some difficult life changes when it came to Jesus' death and resurrection. They had only spent 3 years with their amazing friend. But this was a 24/7 living, serving, eating, sleeping and following time and they had grown very close to Jesus. Last week we heard Frank preach about the doubt of Thomas that shook his faith. Today, we hear about the terrifying fear that is shaking the faith of the disciples.

This is not like the resurrection of Lazarus. Once Lazarus had risen, he was around for everyone to see him, touch him and talk to him. Jesus is there one minute and then gone the next. It is no wonder that when he finally appears to the 11 that they think he is a ghost. They really don't know what is going on. They are frightened as their whole world has been turned upside down. They are in fear because they don't understand what has happened to Jesus. They are in fear because they don't know if the government or religious authorities are watching them. They are in fear because they have no idea what is going to come next.

Jesus appears to his disciples and immediately assures them with the words, "Peace be with you." He then tells them to get a grip on their fear and get rid of their doubts. He then does what we heard last week he did with Thomas. He has them touch him and shows them his hands and his feet. He is telling them that his death was real and his resurrection was real. To prove that I am alive, Jesus says, I have flesh and bones and yes, I can even eat this fish!

These reappearances of Jesus between resurrection and ascension are so important because he knew what was at stake. The disciples had to get past their fear and doubt. They had to snap out of it! They had witnessing to do! They had to tell the story to others!

I love what he does after he calms their fears by showing his humanness to them. He opens up their minds and shows them scripture. Jesus tells them that all of this was God's plan. You can see it in the law of Moses, in the words of the prophets and even in the Psalms. The Messiah was supposed to suffer and rise up from the grave so that the world could be saved from their sins. But this means nothing if you don't tell my story says Jesus. There is no way that you will be able to witness for Christ if fear and doubt sets in because that is when you lose faith.

Fear can be crippling. It can consume anyone that has experienced it. This past week, I have heard 2 heartbreaking stories that have hit closed to home. Earlier in the week, The brother of my daughter's long-time friend was arrested for stabbing a person which ended in the person dying at the hospital. This boy is 19 years old. I can't imagine the fear that this person experienced when he realized what he had done or when he was arrested. I can't imagine the fear of the parents of both young men. It had to been a true fear of great loss in both situations! The other happened yesterday, I found out my cousin is getting a divorce. This beautiful family will soon be separated. I am sure there is fear of the unknown about the children and their reaction and long-term impact of what this will do to them. I am sure there is fear about this transition of life.

I don't know the facts or reasons behind either one of these situations. That is okay because I don't need to know. I just need to pray that they will hear Christ's words in the midst of their fear, "Peace be with you." This fear is so fresh I am not sure that they will be able to move on as quickly as Christ's disciples. Although I am not sure how quickly the disciples moved past their fear. But my prayer is that through this fear that they will know Christ's love. My hope is that they will hear the story about how Christ died for them because he loved them so much. That in their fear and pain, Christ will be there through it all because he has risen and he is alive! One day when the healing has occurred maybe they will be able to be witnesses to Christ's story.

I am preparing for my 7th Kairos Retreat at Rockville Women's Prison. I usually go in November but the team was in need of clergy and my schedule worked out that I could go at the end of May. One of the talks that the women hear during the retreat is called "The Wall". Many of these woman build up walls around themselves and shut out others including God. This happens over time. They build this wall as a kind of protection.

The story begins with a person building a wall that isn't very high and many times people stumble over it when coming and going. As time goes on this person continues to put stones in place and the wall gets higher and higher. These stones have many names but one of them is fear. As the days go by the person's wall is so tall that no light is coming in; and they can't see anyone on the outside. They find life to be very lonely. They are standing in the dark. One day, a flower gets tossed over the wall and lands at this person's feet. They pick it up and smell it, drinking in the beautiful scent. As they scale the wall to see who gave the flower, the person was gone.

As the sorrow sets-in, it occurs to the person that maybe God has sent the flower. Perhaps God was saying it was time to start removing the stones. So this person takes a huge risk and asks God to help break down the wall. One-by-one the stones are taken away. As they remove more stones, the light begins to shine through and warm that lonely place. One day, the person is greeted by a

hand that is reaching in through one of the holes to touch them. The day after this, a person shows up to help remove one of the stones. It is a little bit of a tug of war because this person is not ready to get rid of that stone. But finally, they let go of it.

When the wall is gone, they think their work is complete but God has other ideas. God tells them that they need to go and help others break down their walls. But this must be done in love because if it is not done with love it will be meaningless. (Kairos Prison Ministry International, Inc.; Red Manual published by Kairos; 2005)

During the 4 days of the retreat, a transformation occurs in the hearts of the prisoners as their walls are broken down! They get to experience the unconditional love of Christ and some for the first time. Once they experience that love the mission of Kairos is that they will then share that love of God with others by supporting each other as a community. They will be witnesses to Christ's story.

Thanks be to God for the hope of peace that Christ gives to us in the midst of our fears! May the resurrection transform us so that we can go out and tell Christ's story. Amen.