Highland Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday of Easter – April 27th, 2025
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Acts 5:27-32 John 20:19-31

Fear is a survival response. It starts in your amygdala, a small organ in the middle of your brain, this alerts the nervous system which sets your body's fear response into motion. Stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline are released. Your blood pressure and heart rate increase. Your breathing changes. Even your blood flow changes – blood begins to flow away from your heart and into your limbs which makes it easier to throw punches or run for your life. But as our amygdala senses fear, our prefrontal cortex - where all our reasoning and judgment are harnessed – becomes impaired. When your fear response is triggered, you often cannot think clearly or make rational decisions. Fear has always played an important role in our biology. It has allowed the human species to survive in the face of predators. And, it can become maladaptive and morph into anxiety – where we worry about things that may or may not be active threats.

The disciples are feeling this fear in this passage. They aren't sure what the threats are, they aren't fully sure who or what they should be afraid of, but every part of their fear response is exploding. John tells us that as this passage begins, it's all taking place on Easter morning. We are picking up the story right after everyone has finally realized that the tomb was in fact empty (like the women originally told them all…). There was so much celebrating and rejoicing. And then. Fear. Good news does not erase fear. Good news, incredible news, can ignite hope, but even hope does not eliminate genuine fear. So, there they were in a familiar place desperate with unfamiliar fear. An empty tomb isn't enough to confirm all that Jesus promised is true.

So, the disciples were afraid. They have locked themselves behind closed doors and surrounded themselves with the people that they can trust. And then – you want to talk about fear – Jesus shows up. He just appears and says, "Peace be with you." There was no doubt that it was Jesus. They recognized the scars. They saw the stripes on his back and the hole in his side. And in recognition, John says, they rejoiced. Astonished, ashamed, afraid, this intruder into their hidden place asserts must-needed peace. And Jesus, like God breathing life into the first human, breathed on the disciples. It was finally the understanding of resurrection that they all needed: it means that God still shows up.

Now, poor Thomas has received the eternal title of "doubting Thomas" because of this passage, but what they saw is all Thomas desires. Too often the focus is on his doubt. But Thomas was not there when Jesus showed up on the other side of a locked door to greet fearful followers with peace and the instruction to forgive. Thomas' request is merely for what the other's experienced. We sometimes forget that other disciples basically did the same thing on Easter morning – they couldn't just believe the women, they had to run to the tomb to see for themselves.

The wonder and beauty of this moment is Jesus' willingness to meet Thomas exactly where he is. Thomas names what Jesus knew all his disciples needed. The doors are shut. Jesus appears again, nail scars and all. His offering of peace is followed by a demonstration of forgiveness—no condemnation for Thomas' request—instead, a simple invitation to believe and have faith.

It is currently very easy for me to relate to the disciples in this passage. Things are scary right now. I have a lot of fear – some of it is rational, a lot of it is irrational. And what do I do when my fear feels overwhelming? I turn off social media, I take a step back, I shut out the world around me, I focus on what's in front of me, and I surround myself with people I trust. I do exactly what the disciples have done. And I imagine that many of you do the same thing as well. This is not necessarily the wrong first step.

But this cannot be the only step we take. If we stay locked away out of fear, we cannot be present to help those around us. And, what's worse, we cannot see God at work. So, this passage gives us the next steps. Jesus tells us to believe. Even when there's no tangible proof. Even when things feel impossible and you cannot see the way forward. Even when you are afraid. Because the true gift of resurrection is that we are invited to trust that Jesus will keep showing up again and again.

The next step as Jesus shows the disciples is to be afraid and show up anyway. Fear is a helpful physiological response that keeps us alive. But if it is so overwhelming that it keeps us stuck, it has become problematic.

Two weeks before Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached at a vesper service in Berlin. The power of extremist groups was increasing. Ordinary people were in danger from fighting in the streets. The government and their world were being shattered.

This is what Bonhoeffer preached:

"The overcoming of fear – that is what we are proclaiming here. The Bible, the gospel, Christ, the church, the faith – all are one great battle cry against fear in the lives of human beings. Fear is… the archenemy itself. It crouches in people's hearts. It hollows out their insides, until their resistance and strength are spent and they suddenly break down. Fear secretly gnaws and eats away at all the ties that bind a person to God and to others, and when in a time of need that person reaches for those ties and clings to them, they break and the individual sinks back into [themselves], helpless and despairing… Nothing can make a human being so conscious of the reality of powers opposed to God in our lives as this loneliness, this helplessness, this fog spreading over everything, this sense that there is no way out… of this hell of hopelessness."[1]

---

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Overcoming Fear," Preached in Berlin on the Second Sunday after Epiphany, 15 January 1933 in *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* Tr. Douglas W. Stott, Anne Schmidt-Lange, Isabel Best, Scott A. Moore, Claudia Bergmann (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012

Just as death does not have the last word in our Christian story, neither does fear. We know what fear does to humans. We have seen it in our long, complicated, messy human history. We are seeing it now, everywhere we look. But we also know the full story: fear can be overcome with vulnerability and connection.

Brene Brown is a faithful Episcopalian and a social scientist. She has essentially made a career out of vulnerability. She has observed that "people will do almost anything to not feel fear, including causing pain and abusing power…Spiritual disconnection is what happens when people are bonded together by shared fears and disdain for others. It is the "us versus them" culture. In contrast, being spiritually connected means respecting our common humanity. It is a way of reaching out to others in trust, respect, and love." [2]

Vulnerability and connection are what we are all craving. It's probably what most of the disciples were craving as they were grieving the loss of Jesus's earthly presence. So, our task then, is to show up, despite the fear. Be honest with yourself and those around you. Be vulnerable, even when others try to stop you. Put your whole self out into this world just as God created you. Speak truth to power. Find ways to be subversive to the fear and shame that our leaders are trying to force on us. Believe, even when you are filled with doubts. Trust that by the power of the resurrection, Jesus will keep showing up, so we should keep showing up for one another and for ourselves. Again and again. Amen.

[2] Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (NY: Random House, 2021) 9-13.