

## Jesus' Victory Over Fear Matt 28:1-10; John 20:19-22,26

Good morning. We're continuing our series exploring the benefits of Jesus' resurrection for us today. And this morning we're focussing on his victory over *fear*. I want to begin by reading two short passages of Scripture:

### **[Read Matt 28:1-10]**

*<sup>1</sup>After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.*

*<sup>2</sup>There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. <sup>4</sup>The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.*

*<sup>5</sup>The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples: "He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him." Now I have told you.'*

*<sup>8</sup>So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'*

### **[Read John 20:19-22,26]**

*<sup>19</sup>On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*

*<sup>21</sup>Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' <sup>22</sup>And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'*

*<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'*

## [Pray]

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus said to the women. I’ve heard it said that there are 365 such commands in the Bible. I think that’s probably an exaggeration. But, with a quick scan through Bible Gateway, I did count around 100 such clear commands from God. Evidently, fear is a common problem among God’s people.

And today, Covid-19 is causing a great deal of fear, among adults and children alike. There is fear of catching the disease and what might happen if we do; so, in many cases, there is fear of going out or going to work, especially for those who have direct contact with Covid-19 patients (I know we have felt that, when Fiona has gone to work as a radiographer). There is fear that the lockdown might not end for months, and conversely fear that it will end too soon and cause a second spike. There is fear for our livelihoods, and for the economy of the nation as a whole. There is fear for how this might affect our education and our mental wellbeing. There is fear that Covid-19 might become like flu, returning each year. And many other fears besides.

That list is not meant to add to the problem. Rather, naming our fears is the first step to finding peace in the midst of them. It’s helpful to acknowledge that each of those fears relates to something which *could* happen. But that is not the same as saying it *will* happen. The problem with *fear* is that it can so easily transform a *possibility* into a *certainty* in our minds, such that the potential problem becomes all-consuming and crippling. So, I believe Jesus’ resurrection can have a real positive impact on fear *if* we let the truth of it renew our minds.

Fear permeates *all* the Gospel accounts of the resurrection.

- In Matt 28:4, the guards *feared* the angel. Later, it’s clear they also *feared* the reaction of the Roman Governor for failing to carry out their commission. And likewise, the Jewish leaders *feared* Jesus’ resurrection itself – enough to try to hush it up!
- In Matt 28:5, the women were *afraid*, presumably of the angel, though perhaps also of not finding Jesus’ body in the tomb. That fear remained to a degree even after meeting the angels, though it was then mixed with joy.

- Both Mark 16:6-8 and Luke 24:5 also describe the women's fear, but in Mark's *original* Gospel that fear is left unresolved.
- Luke 24:37 describes the disciples as "startled and *frightened*" when Jesus first entered their locked room – because they thought he was ghost.
- John 20:19 tells us that the room was locked in the first place, because the disciples *feared* the Jewish leaders.
- And a week later, in John 20:26, they were still living in self-imposed lockdown, because of their ongoing *fear*.

It's clear that fear is very pervasive and persistent. And, if we scan through that list, we can see that there are different *types* of fear displayed, and different *objects* of fear.

Firstly, there is the fear of losing power, or of punishment for failing to carry out one's duty, as displayed by the Jewish leaders and the guards respectively. Both fears have to do with the potential loss of *position*, though in the guards' case, the potential loss of life too.

Secondly, there is the fear that is caused by the sudden *shock* of seeing, not just the unexpected, but that which is far *beyond* any reasonable expectation. That includes angels whose bodies shone like lightning inside brilliantly white clothing, and the resurrected physical body of Jesus himself. And, even *temporary* shock, if highly disturbing, can leave lasting damage, as studies in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder have shown.

Thirdly, there is fear caused by real and persistent *threat*. In the disciples' case, that came from the Jewish leaders, who held the power to alienate them from society, to take away their livelihoods, their liberty, or even their very lives. Let's face it, that is what they had just done to Jesus.

So, what difference does Jesus resurrection make to those fears? For the guards and the Jewish leaders, it had *no* positive effect. Their fears remained, even increased, as a result of Jesus' resurrection. For the simple reason that they fought against acknowledging the truth of it, thus positioning themselves against God's plans. If we want Jesus' resurrection to combat our fears, we must first believe that it truly happened. Instead, as is often the case

with those whose fears remain, the Jewish leaders tried to control their fears through coercion of others.

But for the disciples, female and male, their fear *was* very positively affected, and ultimately overcome, when they encountered the risen Lord Jesus. It must have taken some courage for the women to visit the tomb to honour Jesus with a respectful burial. But the sight they saw *at* the tomb must have been truly disturbing! For a start it was unexpected, and any surprise causes at least a momentary racing of the heart. Secondly it was frightening! Guards that appear dead! Jesus' body not there! Angels shining like lightning! What on earth had happened? Who was responsible? Were *they* in danger? Thirdly, the angels' message was bewildering. How could Jesus be alive again? What would it mean if he was? How could they be sure this was true, when it seemed so impossible? Clearly part of them believed it, as is evidenced by their joy. But they were also confused, which kept them in a degree of fear too.

Until they met Jesus himself. Then they clasped his feet, complete with nail holes. They worshipped him. This changed everything. There were no questions to answer now! They didn't need to understand the mechanics of how this works. Because they *encountered* the truth of it for themselves. When *Jesus* said, "Do not be afraid" it had effect. Confusion was answered by experience. Shock was displaced by joy. Fear was driven out by peace. As a result, they ran to the other disciples to share this great news – as Jesus commanded them to do. And they went on sharing this great news for the rest of their lives. Because they had *experienced* the truth that Jesus is Lord of everything, even death itself!

The apostles' experience was similar. John says they were in a locked room because they *feared* the authorities. That's natural! The danger was real and potentially life-threatening. Then Jesus somehow passed into that locked room. And Luke says they were frightened, thinking they saw a ghost! No wonder! Solid bodies can't usually pass through solid walls. But Jesus was no ghost. They could touch him and know that for certain. He ate fish in front of them in Luke's account.

Yet, this must still have been a disturbing thing to encounter, because it was so outside even their *imagination* of what was possible. No

wonder Jesus twice pronounced over them the peace they so desperately needed at that time! And then he commissioned them to be his witnesses of his resurrection to the world. And he spoke forth the Holy Spirit upon them to help them in that task. As a result of this encounter, the fear that kept them in self-imposed lockdown was transformed into a boldness to preach the good news of Jesus Christ for the rest of their lives, no matter what threats or punishments the authorities threw their way. The threat remained, if not increased. What changed was their response to that threat when they encountered Jesus, risen from the dead.

As Charles Colson once said, “I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren’t true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world – and they couldn’t keep a lie for three weeks. You’re telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.”

The resurrection transformed the disciples from fearful to faithful. Though it is worth noting that this was a *process*. A week after they first encountered Jesus resurrected, the room was still *locked*! Once again, Jesus had to pronounce peace upon them. And it wasn’t until the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost that they were *truly* emboldened to preach the good news. Which should give *us* hope that we can *learn* to live in faith, not fear, even if that is a journey. Nevertheless, the apostles’ preaching in Acts demonstrates that the resurrection was the key event that truly transformed their fear to faith.

And that’s the key thing to note. The antidote to fear is not courage. It is faith. Faith that Jesus is who he says he is – the Son of God. Faith that he did indeed rise from the dead. For, if Jesus *is* Lord of life and death, he is Lord of everything – nothing is outside his control.

Such *faith* is the key to inner peace, from which, we find the courage to live as God commands us to live – trusting in him, not *fearing* the circumstances around us. It’s not that the danger goes away. Covid-19 came upon us suddenly in a huge overwhelming shock, and it

remains a serious threat. It has caused, and will cause, much loss of life. It will likely cause economic hardship, possibly long-term hardship. It may become a recurring problem. But, if Jesus is Lord of life and death, he is Lord of everything. *He* can overcome the problem of Covid-19 and all its associated issues, whether that is through giving wisdom to those developing a vaccine, or through bringing governments together to work for the common good, or through answering our prayers for people suffering from Covid-19 (as he has been doing in a number of cases), or through resurrecting to new life those whose time has come, or through whatever other means is necessary to enable life in all its fulness, both on a grand and an individual basis.

That should give us courage to trust him. To trust in *these* circumstances the truth of Paul's words that, "in *all* things God works for the *good* of those who love him" (Rom 8:28). And further, that, "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). We can believe these things, and live peacefully and joyfully in the light of them, because God has proved them true by raising Jesus from the dead. Let's learn to live in faith, not fear. Amen?