**April 19, 2015 – Third Sunday in Easter**

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You might have noticed that today’s Gospel reading is very similar to last week’s Doubting Thomas story. All of the post-resurrection appearance stories are similar, but different in significant ways. Last week, Jesus appears to the disciples, minus Thomas, and they rejoice and believe. Then when Thomas is there, Jesus appears again, shows Thomas his wounds, and Thomas rejoices and believes.

In Luke, Jesus appears to the disciples in a similar way, suddenly and unexpectedly. In the verses before this section, Jesus had already appeared to two of them on the road to Emmaus, and they had rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the rest that they had seen the Lord. Still, his appearance terrified them. They thought they were seeing a ghost.

As in John, Jesus shows them his wounds and offers to let them touch them to see that he is really there in flesh and blood, at the same time questioning their fear and doubts, since he had already appeared to two of them.

When he sees that although the disciples are overjoyed to see him, they are still doubtful, he takes it even a step further. He asks them the most prosaic and human of things – “I haven’t eaten in three days and I’m starved! What’s a guy gotta do to get a snack around here?” Then he proceeds to chow down on a piece of fish, probably surrounded by his now excited and happy disciples. This is no ghost!

Once the disciples are finally convinced and their fears are put to rest, Jesus can get down to the real business at hand. He opens their minds to the scriptures, especially as pertains to the Messiah, in order to equip them for their task going forward – to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations, starting with their own in Jerusalem.

One of the important points that Luke stresses in this passage is how much effort it took on Jesus’ part to get past the disciples’ fears. Our translation says they were “startled and terrified,” but English doesn’t really do justice to the two words used in this sentence, *ptoethentes* and *emphobos*.

*Ptoethentes* means to terrify, causing someone to become psychologically detached from reality and fly off into unrealistic, irrational behavior, Or as Egon puts it in the movie *Ghostbusters,* when they’re facing the Sta-Puft Marshmallow Man, “Sorry, Venkman, I’m terrified beyond the capacity for rational thought.”

*Emphobos* means to be locked in a state of fear, or in the grip of a fearful state of mind. To put it in physiological terms, they were completely in fight or flight mode and incapable of thinking clearly, or of understanding the truth that was standing right in front of them. It takes Jesus three tries to get their attention and stop them from running around in panic.

After asking them why they are so frightened, and probably not getting a coherent answer, Jesus tells them to look at his hands and feet and see that it’s him. When that doesn’t work, he suggests that they touch him to see that he is flesh and blood. And when THAT doesn’t work, he asks them for something to eat, because everyone knows that ghosts don’t eat.

And as I said, that finally does the trick. I can just see the disciples standing stock still, staring at what they are sure is a ghost, calmly eating some fish. Then, one by one, they relax and start to laugh in relief. Well, of COURSE that’s Jesus! We knew that all along. \*I\* wasn’t scared, not really. I was just…um…surprised. Yeah, that’s it, surprised. Not know Jesus when he’s standing right in front of us? Hah, that’s a good one!

And then, finally, when they’re not in the grip of fear, can Jesus have a serious conversation with them, and tell them what their role in the kingdom will be once he’s gone back to the Father.

As in this case in Luke, in each of the four Gospels Jesus gives us work to do. In Matthew, of course, is the Great Commission – to make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that Jesus commanded them. In Mark, we are to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation. In John we are to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. And here in Luke we are to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus name to all nations.

But in order to do any of these things, we first have to understand what it is that we’re teaching and preaching. Our minds have to be open to the scriptures, and to the Word of God, or in other words, Jesus. This takes work and dedication and desire.

But we can’t even start, as Luke illustrates, until our minds are not consumed by fear. This is when it really gets hard, because unlike the old Zombie’s song from the 60’s, it’s not love that’s all around us, it’s fear. Fear permeates our society so much that we don’t even realize it’s there half the time.

The first and most obvious place we see it is in politics. People say that ever since 9/11 we have lived in fear of terrorism and an attack from outside, but I think it goes back much further than that. When I was growing up, during the Cold War, I, and everyone I knew, lived with the underlying fear that there would be a nuclear war. I’m a little too young for the original “duck and cover” days, but somehow fear of nuclear fallout found its way into my mind.

I think it had something to do with the Cuban Missile Crisis. We were living in Duluth, and the fighters flying into the airbase there flew right over our house, breaking the sound barrier as they went. So all night long, there were loud sonic booms very often, and of course my parents were obviously very frightened – not of the jets, but of what they stood for. My mind put it all together with the news I was hearing and I came up with fallout as ashes floating through the air that could go through concrete. What can I say – I was seven.

So if a clueless seven year old picked up on all of this stuff, just imagine what the fears were on a national level. And it hasn’t let up since. With the fall of the Soviet Union, we’ve had to find new enemies to fear, and who should pop up but Al Quaeda.

I haven’t seen the level of fear that gripped our country post 9/11 since duck and cover, and there is the same level of irrationality. It’s resulted in crazy measures being taken at the airport in the name of safety, most of which have been proven to be ineffective. It’s resulted in the willingness to throw away our basic constitutional freedoms in the name of national security. And it’s resulted in a level of jingoism not seen since the McCarthy days.

But our fears are not just about war and terrorism. In fact, except for our extreme response to it, I would think that fear of terrorists might be a good thing. Like fear of grizzly bears. But that isn’t all we’re afraid of.

Advertising has long been based on fear in its basest form. Fear of losing status, fear of not being able to find a mate, fear of poverty and hunger and homelessness. Fear of disease is at the base of those “Ask your doctor about…” ads in all the magazines. (From what I understand, actual doctors HATE those things.) These are all things that advertising exploits to sell products. And we fall for it in droves. Advertisers count on that and it works.

But wait, there’s more! The Church is not exempt from fear. As a matter of fact, unfortunately, it often forms the basis for much of our interaction with the world. I’m not talking about the fear of going to hell, although I personally think threatening someone with eternal damnation is a rotten way to show the love of God in the world. But for some denominations, that’s their interpretation so I’m not going to criticize it more than I already have.

But the fear I’m talking about here is twofold. First there’s fear of declining membership and then, following closely on its heels, the fear of running out of money. It’s like the Phobos and Deimos of the Church.

Piece of useless information – Phobos and Deimos are the sons of the Greek gods Ares and Aphrodite, and are the gods of Terror and Dread. They go into battles with their father, who is the god of war, to do their dirty work.

The thing about both declining membership and limited funds is that they aren’t a certainty. That is, they aren’t a certainty IF we can replace fear with faith. This is what Luke was getting at in this Gospel passage. Fear and faith cannot exist in the same place. It’s one or the other.

And the Gospels have given us all the tools we need, in these last stories, to replace our fears of scarcity with faith in Jesus Christ. The key is in those commissions I talked about earlier. Feed his sheep; preach the Gospel; preach repentance and forgiveness of sin; and baptize and make disciples of all nations.

The more we reach out into the world – into our own community – the more faith will push fear out of our minds. I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again. The worst thing that could happen to Grace Church isn’t running out of money. The worst thing that could happen is that we don’t live out our faith in the world.

And if the two fears of scarcity of money and people go together, so do their solutions. Outreach and mission bring in people, who in turn, often bring in money. It’s as clear as that. C. Kirk Hadaway, who directs congregational research for the Episcopal Church says, “More important than any particular theological bent is, in fact, a sense of mission for the parish.” And, “Growing congregations are clear about why they exist and what they should be doing.”

I’m not saying that this process is easy. Sometimes fears are our oldest friends, and it’s hard to break up with them. But they aren’t our best friends. God is our best friend, and faith in him is stronger than any fear. I wish our reading today had included verse 49. The last thing Jesus says to his disciples, aside from his final blessing, is this:

*And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*

The disciples had to wait a little while, but we don’t. We HAVE been clothed with power from on high – that’s what our baptism and the Eucharist are all about. Power from God to cast out all of our fears and power to make a difference. Now it’s up to us to take that power, let our faith replace our fears, and reach out to our world in Jesus’ name.

Amen.