

**Easter Sunday - A - 3/23/08
St. David's**

In the name of the Christ we discover today, the Christ who lifts us all up to the level of queens and kings. Amen.

We heard about it last Sunday and again on Good Friday.

Immediately after the Romans came to arrest Jesus to put him to death, the author of the Gospel of Matthew tells us this; “Then ALL the disciples deserted him and fled.” Shortly thereafter, Peter is confronted outside the courtyard about his relationship with Jesus. Scared for his own life, he denies that he knows him three times. Now this morning, we find all the male disciples huddled away, in fear that they too will be caught and killed by the Roman officials.

The fear that courses through the disciples veins when their leader is taken from them is very genuine. They have a right to be concerned for their lives. There is the strongest possibility that they too will be killed because of the threat they posed to the Roman empire.

It is not difficult for us to relate with the disciples, is it? Living in the world we do, we have genuine fears too. Rarely does an evening go

by when all of the Phoenix news stations do not lead their coverage with at least two violent deaths. Dangerous threats seem to loom around every corner, no matter where we live.

This past Tuesday, when I was in Salt Lake City for the renewal of my ordination vows, the dean of the Cathedral told me that even they, in that relatively placid city, were afraid to walk at night time between The Cathedral of St. Mark and the Cathedral of the Madeline because people were mugged so often. Even here in Page, people have grown more afraid of walking through our own quaint little park after the brutal murder of Eric Smothers a few weeks ago.

Fear is also the emotion most often utilized by our advertisers. Remember the famous ad in the 90's? This is your brain...then the image of the frying egg, followed by, this is your brain on drugs. Perhaps the most effective deterrent for smoking have been the ads graphically showing us the physical calamities people have faced as a result of lighting up, including the person with cancer of the throat, who speaks to us through an electronic voice box. We are told that if we don't buy Brand X tires for our vehicle, the life of our baby in the car

seat may be in jeopardy. If we don't put an alarm system on our house, we are in serious danger of being attacked in the middle of the night...and on and on and on.

In the midst of our presidential campaign, we saw ads about a 3 AM phone call to the White House, suggesting that we should consider our fear of an attack first when choosing our leader.

Our government also seems to operate most often out of fear. The newest appendage to our bureaucracy for example, is called Homeland Security, a group created out of our fear of another terrorist attack. As I mentioned last week, we spend \$ 500 billion dollars a year on national defense because we are so fearful of others hurting us. The immigration debate in this country also centers on fear, suggesting that if we do not secure our borders, our lives will be in danger, or at least our standard of living will be in jeopardy. Because we are in fear of so many around us, we build gated communities to protect ourselves.

Fear also permeates our lives on a personal level. We live in fear that we are going to lose our job, our house or our nest egg. We are frightened that we will lose our spouse or someone else close to us. We

fear our own death.

In addition to the fear we have of all these dangers, every aspect of our lives today seems to be full of constant worry and stress. In the post-modern age, we have traded a life of hard labor for a life of anxiety and fear.

Like the disciples, these fears paralyze us. Fear causes us to choose the path of least resistance, to do what we think must be done to save our families, our jobs, or our lives. Fear often causes us to do things we do not believe in, to take part in immoral or unethical activities, because we fear what might happen to us if we do not. Fear makes cowards of us all.

Jesus' life was all about boldly standing up against the powers of the world that ruled by intimidation and fear. He spent his life working to break up the social and religious systems and leaders that caused people to live in fear. When Mary became pregnant with Jesus, she futuristically tells how Jesus accomplishes this. "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones."

The life of Jesus was a top down theology. Knock those rulers who are instilling fear in the people down off their pedestals. Bring dignity to all by bringing the king down to the level of the people. Create a just and humane world by analyzing the systems that are causing fear in people and then obliterate those systems. This is the Jesus the disciples knew so well, the Jesus who took away their fears by courageously taking on the rulers who instilled that fear.

When the Roman officials and a few mucky-muck church leaders realized what Jesus was doing, they too responded in fear. To protect their positions of authority and their ability to continue instilling fear in the masses, they put Jesus to death. Imagine the shock of the disciples when the very power brokers Jesus had come to bring down from their thrones killed him. In addition to once again being scared to death, they must have been embarrassed and ashamed. They had obviously put their money on the wrong horse. They were sure that Jesus was the one, the one who was going to topple the oppressive system that always left them living in fear.

What the disciples didn't know, what they never seemed to

understand while Jesus was with them, was that his life was to be only half of the story. In life, Jesus shook down their oppressors to eliminate the people's fear. But today, in resurrection, Jesus reverses the strategy. He would fulfill the rest of the Magnificat as sung by Mary before his birth. Today, instead of a top down theology, Christ begins a bottom up theology. He starts lifting up the lowly. In resurrection, Christ brings the power to the people.

Through the experience of the risen Christ, we hear this power fill the disciples almost immediately. It has already begun in today's Gospel. The only people who were able to work through their fear enough to visit the tomb are, as usual, the women. And as they are greeted by the angel, it is not a surprise when he tries to assuage the emotion that is overwhelming them. "Do not be afraid", he says. Of course, as we all know so well, it is not so easy to let go of the genuine fears that plague our lives. As the women leave the tomb, we hear that they are full of joy, but that they also continue to carry that fear that pulls all of us down, the fear that paralyzes all of us, the fear that makes cowards of us all. But on the way back to the male disciples, they are

met again, this time by the risen Christ himself. Once more they hear Christ repeat the same phrase used by the angel. "Do not be afraid." And this time, the fear disappears. In fact, the women are so emboldened by being lifted up by Christ, that they have the courage to announce the resurrection to the males, even though they know they will be met with deep skepticism. From that moment on, every time someone experiences the risen Christ, the same thing happens. They suddenly go from being scared out of their wits, afraid to even appear in public, to a boldness of character that allows them to profess Christ to anyone and everyone, even though they know that by doing so, they are putting themselves in extreme danger. When people scoffed at their claims, they continued professing it. When officials ordered them to stop, they would not. The fear that had overwhelmed them had abated and because of that, their lives became passionate and powerful. Though the power structure still had all the cards and still killed them on a regular basis, their lives were no longer controlled by dread. When you are no longer consumed with fear, those who use fear as their weapon against you no longer have any power over you. And suddenly,

the lowly are lifted up to the position of the powerful. That is the power of resurrection. That is what Easter offers to you and me.

The danger that the disciples faced did not go away, of course. But through the power of the resurrection, they were able to not let that danger *define* them. It is the same for all of us. Many speak of the wonders of resurrection and the hope it gives us for life after death. That is, after all, what Easter is all about. But just as amazing to me is this; Easter doesn't just offer us life after death. It also offers us life *before* death. It has the power to take away our genuine fears and allow us to boldly live life fully and completely, with honor and dignity, never being afraid again of anyone who wields power over us. Just imagine what your life could be if you really could let go of those fears and anxieties. Imagine how fruitful life would become. That is what Easter has to offer all of us, if only we can find a way to truly believe this amazing story.

Of course, therein lies the rub. As much as all of us would love to let go of our own fears so that we can live more productive and meaningful lives, how are we supposed to buy into such an unbelievable

tale? Is it even possible for a rational thinking person in the 21st century to truly accept a narrative that even most people in the first century rejected as the fanciful tales of a radical cult?

In short, my answer is an unequivocal yes. I say that flat out because I believe that this is the truest story I have ever heard. And if your rational minded, afraid of anything that sounds the least bit woo-woo, priest has come to terms with resurrection, so can you. For those of you who have never struggled with belief in resurrection, I ask for your forgiveness. But for any of you who are looking for a rational way to believe this story in the 21st century, let me offer you this. No accepted historian that I am aware of would argue that Jesus lived, died and was buried. It is also clear from a historical perspective that his followers totally disappeared from sight for some period of time, that length of time unknown to us, somewhere between three days and 25 years. But then, very suddenly, those believers reappeared on the scene and started putting their lives on the line to get out their message. Just as suddenly their numbers began growing exponentially almost overnight. No one of course, can say for sure what made all this

occur. But what we *can* offer from a historical perspective, is that *something* very dramatic must have happened for a bunch of frightened puppies to suddenly come out of hiding and start professing something that very well might get them killed.

One more. If you were going to write a story to try to convince people that the resurrection was indeed true, who would you choose to discover the empty tomb and first see the risen Christ? Remember that in the first century, women could not be witnesses at any trial, even for other women. And though our four Gospels disagree on many things, including what women and how many came to the tomb this morning, on this they all agree. Women and only women came to the tomb. You would have to be an idiot to write a story suggesting that women were the first witnesses to Easter, unless of course, it was actually true.

None of this, of course, proves anything. But if it was not resurrection that suddenly allowed the disciples to stop living in constant fear, then I want whatever it was. Because whatever it was, it has the power to change all of us. It has the power to embolden every step we take and allow us to never again live in fear of what people

wield over us. It has the power to bring us full dignity and gives us the courage to stand up for anyone whose dignity someone tries to take away. It is quite simply, the most powerful force the world has ever known. Call it resurrection, call it reanimation, call it rebirth, call it whatever you want. But don't miss out on it. Because it will change you. It will change everything. It is Easter and because of it, you no longer have to be afraid of anything. Amen.