

Open the doors and the windows
Psalm 113; Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31
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We all know moments that we are fearful, I guess. If it is not fear of death, or fear of losing a loved one, it may be fear of losing a job, or simply fear of the unknown. Fear of exams, fear of driving a car in Cairo, fear of how our children will do when they grow up.

In our Gospel reading we have seen that the disciples of Jesus Christ, on the evening of the day on which He rose from the grave, were together in one house, and they were afraid. Very afraid. Fear dictated their actions.

1 Behind locked doors

They were together, that helped of course. Togetherness was a good and positive mark of the early church, and many of us crave for this sort of Christian community.

I think most people in our world desire to be part of a strong community, as being together is what we were really made for.

People find this togetherness in many different communities. And often these communities are defined by what they are not, or by painting outsiders in dark and negative colors. The contrast with outsiders makes the insiders feel more united.

The first Christians, after the resurrection of Jesus, were a tight community - but it seems they were initially bound together by fear - they had their doors locked for fear of the Jews. Easy to imagine, they feared for their lives! And so, they were close to each other.

Just a few days earlier, the disciples had witnessed the killing of their master, Jesus, at the instigation of the Jewish leaders. Jewish mobs had been shouting: 'crucify him, crucify him'.

No wonder the followers of Jesus were scared. They were still in a state of shock after the events of the past days, and they dreaded that the fate of Jesus could also become theirs.

They were so scared that they stuck together, they locked the doors, and they must have also closed the shutters of the house. To keep evil outside.

'So lock the doors, let us try to not attract any attention of the religious leaders, or of the army, let us not give them any reason for coming after us... Let us be extremely careful, because you can never know what they will do next...'

Maybe in this way the disciples were able to keep the Jewish leaders, their enemies, outside, but they could not keep their morbid fear of death outside; it filled their hearts.

What fear do we try to keep outside? We often seem to live in our Christian communities as if we live in a castle, with thick walls and the bridge drawn up.

Surely, it is lovely to live together as brothers and sisters. In Psalm 133 we have read about this. Christian unity is beautiful; it supports us, it encourages us, it strengthens our faith. So yes, of course we like to be a strong community - but we should not be knit together by fear of what is outside in the world.

2 Presence of Jesus changes everything

It is comfortable to be together with people of a similar worldview, and lifestyle, and faith. It is great to have our kids grow up in such an environment as well. It is great to have good friends in such a community.

But such community does not receive its strength from blocking out what we are afraid of. A strong community is rather the result of Jesus Christ being in our midst. He liberates us from our fears of the unknown, of the other, of what might happen.

When the disciples of Jesus could not get out of this cycle of fear that darkened their hearts and minds, our Lord Jesus Christ himself intervened.

If you feel locked in cycles of worries, and fear, He can enter to bring light, and hope, and comfort, and joy, as he did for the disciples. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

In the case of the disciples, he physically entered their house. He can enter into our life as well, even in times when our minds and hearts are locked and sealed.

That is what He did for the disciples. In an instant, darkness, sadness and fear, were gone, and the disciples were overjoyed!

The fear of the disciples was not gone because the locks were strong enough, or because the Jews promised them they would not make their lives miserable. Their fear was not gone because some political powers promised to protect them. And what made all the difference was not some sort of power of positive thinking either.

The difference was the presence of Jesus Christ himself. He came into their midst. The circumstances did not change, but Jesus entered in the midst of those circumstances.

To those who want to follow him, he offers peace.

When Jesus said to his disciples: 'peace', this was not a pious wish, as we can wish someone a good day, and then it can still turn out to be a bad day. No, when Jesus says: 'peace', he effectively gives that peace to those who follow him. To those who dwell in darkness, his word 'peace' creates actual change. It makes the light flow in.

His miraculous presence showed to his disciples that he was truly God. The grave had not been able to hold him. He is forever victorious, and he is with those who follow him. The powerful Lord and God is with us.

Jesus also showed the disciples the scar tissue in his hands and his side. He could be touched. He had a real body. Not similar to ours, because his body was glorified. But he was definitely not a ghost.

After his resurrection our Lord preserved something human in himself. He was not dehumanized; the impact of the incarnation was not deleted. That is why St John, when he describes our Lord in heaven, describes him as 'a Lamb, standing as though it had been slain'. (Rev 5:6)

Our Lord Jesus, after his resurrection and his return to the Father, has brought, in a manner we will never understand, an aspect of suffering humanity into the Triune God.

So the disciples, scared of what the Jews might want to do to them, now knew that Jesus Christ was risen, he was the living God, *and he was also able to sympathize with their fears.*

'We have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses', we read in Hebrews 4:15. He is with us in the midst of our suffering, and he knows about our feelings, and fears, and our problems.

He understands our desire to sometimes close the curtains, stay in bed, and lock ourselves in. He also understands that as Christians we so often tend to close the doors of church, and just be our nice safe group.

Look at the scars on his body, and you know that we have a Lord who not only understands, but he even feels your hurts.

3 Unlock the doors – go into the world

Jesus Christ gave peace to his followers in order to take away their fear. This peace was in fact the impact of Jesus Christ communicating himself to his followers.

The peace of the Lord is liberating. His presence is liberating, because it takes fear away – fear of hell, fear of death, fear of enemies, fear of the unknown, fear of political forces, of religious powers, fear of ‘what if...’ Fear of the future of your kids; fear of losing your job.

Jesus Christ did not actually change the dangers; he did not rescue the apostles out of their problems. He changed their hearts. He changed them, to no longer be paralyzed by worries.

The peace of Christ is not a commodity that can be received separate from Jesus Christ himself. Receiving his peace, means receiving him. And if He is in our midst, we have great peace.

He changed his followers by simply being in their midst; by being the center of their life. And by coming in their midst, he made himself the heart of their community.

The church does not need to focus on the scary world outside, or on a set of rules or membership cards in order to be one. It is a community because our Lord binds us together.

Immediately after taking this fear away, our Lord ordered the disciples to unlock the doors, to open the windows, to no longer keep the danger out, but to actually do the opposite, and to face the show. He said, go into the world – facing the dangers that you were so fearful of.

He gives our community an external focus. A community that looks inward, is in danger of quibbling over little issues, minor matters. A community that is focussed on serving the world as Jesus did, will be stronger and it lasts longer and it reflects who Jesus is.

And think about this, ultimately, we do not go into the world because Jesus told us to do that, but because He himself did that, and through us, he does it. He himself goes into the world through us. We reflect who he is and what He wants. By our faith in him, we share some of his DNA. The DNA of his Holy Spirit who He gave to us.

Our common focus on Jesus as the center of the community of the church, makes us go out into the world - because that is what Jesus, the center of the church always did and does.

The Lord as the center of the community drives us to not lock ourselves in, but to be like he was in this world: a blessing for all. A focus on Jesus is therefore totally liberating. It liberates us from our fears and it liberates us to go and participate in the world around us with confidence, as witnesses to our Lord and his resurrection.

“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” “See, I am with you all days”. This is what our Lord Jesus Christ speaks today to all of us.

Conclusion

The almighty Lord who is able to sustain and to strengthen you in the midst of all of life's circumstances, He will really do so. With his resurrection he proved he can do it. With his humanity he showed that he desires to do it.

He invites us, Christians, to not be afraid of whatever may befall us in life. He conquered death, he can defeat your fear. Fear not, but rather, open the doors, get out of your castle. Live in the world with joy, be with your neighbors, your colleagues, your friends, and be yourself.

When we serve God together, with Jesus Christ as the heart of our community, we will see his work through our hands in the world, and in our midst as well. We lose fear, but we gain confidence. Because He cares for us.

And let us speak to our friends,, fearlessly, of the things that are important for us - and that includes the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. Fear not, says our Lord, for I am with you until the end of the world.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.