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**Title:** Overcoming Fear

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**Scripture:** [Psalm 27:1-14](#)

**Text:** [John 20:19-31](#)

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Welcome to National Associate Minister Sunday! I'm not sure it has ever been formally declared as such but it is assumed as undisputed fact that more associate ministers preach on this Sunday than any other Sunday of the year. I have served in the role as associate minister for 18 of the 28 years since my ordination and I believe I have preached on the Sunday after Easter all 18 of those years. Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining. It's always the same reading and I love the story. The assigned passage for this Sunday after Easter is what we have traditionally called the "doubting Thomas" story related in the Gospel of John.

Having preached on it 18 times in my ministry, I think I've looked at the scripture from about every angle possible. The Thomas character is certainly engaging – he was not present on Easter evening when Jesus appears to the rest of the disciples and, when the disciples tell him what happened, he thinks they are pulling an April Fool's prank and wants to see for himself. I've taken the approach any number of times that we're a lot like Thomas – that it is OK to doubt and question our faith. In my estimation, such questioning and probing actually strengthen our faith. I've also taken the approach that Thomas is actually "believing Thomas" because of his profession of faith a week later where he is present when Jesus appears to them again. His response is "my Lord and my God."

I've looked at it from the point of view of the presumably other 10 disciples – Judas is out and Thomas is absent leaving 10. They've got to be wondering what to do next. Is it time for a career change? Do they try to restart the fishing business? They've followed this man for three years. Now there are lots of questions in their lives about what the future holds for them and for this movement that was just getting rolling. I'm sure there was a sense of uncertainty. We can relate to that when we have a major life event that rocks us to our core and causes us to reevaluate our life's direction. I've looked at the disappointment and rejection they must have felt.

There is one aspect of this story, however, that I don't believe I've ever considered. FEAR. For some reason, when I read the story again this year, the idea of fear and the word "fear" jumped off the page at me. "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week and the doors of the

house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews..." And then again a week later, it makes a point to say that the doors were shut. Have those words always been there? How could they blend into the passage for 18 years and be so blatant this year? Scripture is like that.

Last week in this place and around the world, the resurrection was cause for celebration. But now, the time has come when we must live the resurrection and not just celebrate. Living it is harder than celebrating it. There have been days, likely even a couple since last Sunday, that we'd prefer to stay in bed, pull the covers over our head and close out the world.

Some days, it seems easier and safer to lock the doors of our house and avoid the circumstances and people that are outside the doors. However, every time we shut the doors of our life, our mind or our heart, we end up imprisoning ourselves. For every person we lock out, we lock ourselves in. That's where the disciples find themselves - Easter evening, first day of the week, they've been to the tomb to see it empty, they've heard the five words from Mary Magdalene - "I have seen the Lord" - and they've locked themselves in.

John is universally understood to be the last written of the four gospels and it is usually dated to around 90-110 AD. The things that have happened in the intervening 70 years would have influenced both the writer and the hearer. According to Bible commentator, Gail O'Day, the community we see in John's gospel understands itself to be a persecuted religious minority. The term, "the Jews" is seen as shorthand for an intra-Jewish struggle that was going on at the time - like a fight between the Baptists and the Methodists.<sup>1</sup> There's also some irony here as the very Jewish Jesus is the one who appears to them in that room long before the name "Christian" is uttered.

What struck fear into the disciples that Easter night? They may have feared that they were next - guilt by association you know. Jesus was executed for rebel-rousing the status quo and they were his followers. If the authorities really want to put down this rebellion once and for all, they would come after the disciples next. That thinking would have certainly been understandable. Or, if Jesus really was alive, were they fearful of him. What would he think of them? After all, they had abandoned him at the last. They had denied even knowing Jesus, some of them multiple times. Was the Jew they were afraid of named Jesus?

Regardless of the theological gymnastics needed to determine the source of their fear, the fact was that their fear was real and their fear had immobilized them to the point of barricading themselves in a room, drawing

the curtains and blowing out the candles. I made that last part up but you can imagine it being true.

First, let me say this about fear – reasonable, rational, normal fear is a good thing. Think about it, without a healthy dose of fear you might be tempted on a trip to the zoo to crawl over the fence and pet the polar bear on the head. Fear holds you back and that is a good thing. We know better than to get too close to the edge of a cliff because of fear. I just completed our tax return last week – don't judge, it's not 11:59 pm on April 15 yet. While I think I would be honest even if no one was looking, I have a healthy fear of the IRS that makes me want to do what is right.

The point is that reasonable or normal fear protects us from danger. On the other hand, abnormal or excessive fear is a monster which can paralyze and destroy. Panic is fear out of control. As we consider this post-resurrection story we see right away the cause of excessive fear that translates to any situation. Anytime your source of security is not strong enough to sustain you, then fear runs wild. For the disciples, Jesus provided the source of security for them but now he was gone and not just gone and died but really gone.

Let me say that again - excessive fear is caused when our source of security is not strong enough to sustain us. The most common fears relate to matters we cannot control. Even with our best efforts, we cannot guarantee success in marriage or in the workplace. Companies can down-size or be sold, leaving us without a job. My health and the health of my family can be promoted but not guaranteed. Therefore, if we are our own primary sources of security, we will be tempted to panic. Basil King in his book, *The Conquest of Fear*, points out that fear causes more misery than all the sin and sickness of our lives combined. We are not sick all the time. We are not sinning all the time. But most people are afraid of something or somebody all the time.<sup>2</sup>

I read a story this week about a couple who were vacationing in Yosemite National Park. The wife expressed her concern about their planned tent camping because of bears and said she would feel more comfortable in a hotel. The husband said that he'd like to camp, but, to calm her concerns, they'd talk to the park ranger to see what the likelihood of a bear encounter would be. When they found a ranger, he told them, "Well, we haven't seen any grizzlies in this area so far this year, or black bears either, for that matter."

At that point, the wife said, "What? There are two kinds of bears out here? How can you tell the difference? Which one is more dangerous?" The ranger

replied, "Well, that's easy. If the bear chases you up the tree and it comes up after you, it's a black bear. If it shakes the tree until you fall out, it's a grizzly." The couple immediately called for hotel reservations.<sup>3</sup>

I suspect that many of you think her reaction was quite reasonable. Even though bear attacks don't happen very often, just the thought is quite scary. They might miss some of the thrills of being closer to nature, but we can understand their reaction. Fear can be debilitating. Fear keeps us from living our lives openly and joyfully. It keeps us running when our real need is to rest and relax. ANYTIME YOUR SOURCE OF SECURITY IS NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN YOU, THEN FEAR IS ALLOWED TO RUN WILD.

If we know that fear can immobilize us, what can we do about it? Fear had immobilized the disciples and Jesus has words for them – he has to say them twice but they are the same words – "Peace be with you." He was back to reclaim his role as their source of security to allow them to unlock the doors and get outside and tell a story that was waiting to be told. He was there to restore their faith – to instill in them the Holy Spirit that would always be with them. In their case and ours, faith can be the opposite of fear.

There's an old saying that when fear knocks at the door and faith answers, no one is there. Fear kills people; faith saves them. Fear blows up bridges; faith builds bridges. Fear keeps you in adolescence; faith brings you to adulthood. Fear defines itself by what we're against; faith defines itself by what we're for. Fear keeps us in holy huddles; faith breaks out into mission fields. Fear states; faith demonstrates. Fear revels in being top-dog; faith revels in being the underdog. Fear keeps us in one place; faith keeps us moving.

Father Henri Nouwen taught us many things, but this one thing stands out above all the others: you can choose to live in a house of fear or a house of love. You can't live in both at the same time. Where do you choose to make your home, in the House of Love or in the House of Fear?<sup>4</sup>

Live in a house of love could be translated to "Peace be with you." That was a common greeting and probably one he had spoken to them many times. But in this situation, it was more than a greeting. It was a message. Jesus means for his followers to have peace. As the popular preacher Adam Hamilton has said, "The resurrected Jesus didn't promise wealth or health or prosperity or power; what he promised was peace."

Perhaps you've seen the t-shirts, coffee mugs and everything else imaginable that have the words – "Keep Calm and Carry On" phrase on

them. What you may not know is that this phrase was one of three developed by Britain's Ministry of Information during World War II to put on posters to keep up British morale in the midst of that stressful and unknown time. The plan for this third poster – Keep Calm and Carry On – was for it to be issued after the German invasion of Britain which never happened. This third poster was only found a few years ago and thus the popularity.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus could have given the same words to the disciples in the locked room on those two Sundays. He said, "Peace be with you" as more than just an informal greeting but rather the instilling of actual peace to them. He could have said, "Keep Calm and Carry On – you have work to do, unlock the doors and get out there and let's make this happen. Don't let my death dissuade you from our ministry together. "

But internal peace is elusive. It's easy to wear the words, "keep calm" on a t-shirt but quite another thing to internalize it and let it happen. Duke University did a study on this very subject years ago. They listed eight keys to emotional peace – let me tick them off for you and you'll get the idea. If you want them in detail, they'll be near the end of my sermon manuscript when it's posted online this week (that's a glimmer of hope for those of you wondering when this sermon will end). Here are their keys to peace that may be helpful for the disciples and for you and for me.

The first key is, "Get rid of suspicion and resentment." Nursing a grudge is a major factor in unhappiness.

The second is, "Don't live in the past." An unwholesome preoccupation with old mistakes and failures leads to depression.

The third key is, "Don't waste time and energy fighting conditions you cannot change." Cooperate with life, instead of trying to run away from it.

The fourth is, "Force yourself to stay involved with the living world." Resist the temptation to withdraw and become reclusive during periods of emotional stress as the disciples were trying to do.

The fifth is, "Refuse to indulge in self-pity when life hands you a raw deal." Accept the fact that nobody gets through life without some sorrow and misfortune.

The sixth is, "Cultivate the old-fashioned virtues love, humor, compassion, and loyalty."

Number seven is, "Do not expect too much of yourself." When there is too wide a gap between self-expectation and your ability to meet the goals you have set, feelings of inadequacy are inevitable.

And finally, number eight is "Find something bigger than yourself to believe in." Self-centered egotistical people score lowest on any test for measuring happiness.<sup>6</sup> You might have heard this before - ANYTIME YOUR SOURCE OF SECURITY IS NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN YOU, THEN FEAR IS ALLOWED TO RUN WILD.

As far as that last one goes - "Find something bigger than yourself to believe in" – might I suggest Jesus? That is the ultimate key to peace of mind. Although the disciples planned to huddle in their shuttered church museum forever, Jesus came and exhaled on their hiding place and blew it all wide open, spilling them out onto the streets of Easter. And now it's our turn, to either stay afraid or to receive the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit to help us overcome our fear and make a difference in the world. I'll go unlock the door.

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<sup>1</sup> O'Day, Gail. "The Gospel of John" in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 505.

<sup>2</sup> King, Basil. *The Conquest of Fear*, Wilder Publishers, March 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Bear story found in a variety of sources including illustrations on fear at [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com).

<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, Henri reference found in *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, Volume 2*, Westminster John Know Press, 2008, page 443.

<sup>5</sup> Keep Calm and Carry On information from [www.keepcalmandcarryon.com](http://www.keepcalmandcarryon.com), "the only official and licensed store," under the "history" tab of that site.

<sup>6</sup> Duke University study cannot be directly cited but the above list, found in Randy Alcorn's book, *Happiness*, cites another source, Rudy Magnan in "Reinventing American Education." That source cites, "Peace of Mind, Factors Contributing to Emotional Stability," Duke University, 1980.