

2 Easter Sunday, B

In England, not far from London, is a small hotel with this inscription carved on the wall above the fireplace: “Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there.”

That is a beautiful message, which everyone would like to believe, because each of us, one way or another, faces the problem of fear. How nice it would be to discover that all of our fears are only illusions that would vanish in the air, if we had the faith and courage to face them. Unfortunately, such is not the case. This world in which we live is unpredictable at best and violent at worst. To be certain, many of our fears are merely shadows; and we would be better off without them. But we would be exceedingly unwise to think of fear as an utter evil to be totally eliminated from our lives.

The truth is that we all need a certain amount of the right kind of fear. It will keep us from being run over by cars, or jumping off of tall buildings, or getting hooked on drugs. There are some things in this life that we ought to be afraid of, and we desperately need to know that. Our business is not to get rid of fear, but rather to conquer it, to make it our servant instead of our master.

Today’s Gospel reading tells of a time when the followers of Jesus had locked themselves behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. In this case, fear had taken charge of their lives and had literally put them in prison. They had recently witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. Now, they were afraid to go out on the streets, lest the same thing should happen to them. Obviously, this fear was not a mere shadow. There was substance to it. The streets of Jerusalem, at that time, were a dangerous place for close friends of Jesus. But they had to conquer that fear, either that or spend the rest of their lives behind locked doors.

We know, of course, that these men ultimately overcame their fears, and learned to live courageously in the face of some very real dangers. Our question is - How did they do it? - because each of us needs to do the very same thing.

At the outset, we should recognize a correlation between fear and moral failure. It is not absolute, but it does exist. Not all of our fears come from moral failure, but all of our moral failures give rise to some kind of fear. So there is a category of fear that can never be overcome apart from an open and upright life.

We cannot know how much of this was working in the minds of the disciples, but you can be certain that they were not proud of their behavior during the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. They had denied and forsaken their best friend in the hour when he needed them most. They had played the role of moral cowards; and once you start running, it is very difficult to find a stopping place. One wrong deed brings another. One lie necessitates another in order to cover for the first. On and on it goes, weaving a web of deception that complicates life, destroys tranquility and makes it impossible for a person to live with confidence.

An example of this tragic truth can be found all the way back in the book of Genesis. There one can read the familiar and fascinating story of Adam and Eve. Ancient though it is, this story contains some marvelous insights into human nature. No sooner had Adam eaten the forbidden fruit than we hear him saying to God, "I was afraid.... so I hid myself." There you have it - the first account of man's moral failure and the first account of man's fear are placed side by side in the same story.

This correlation is verified not only in biblical history, but by modern science as well. Look at the polygraph machine, more commonly called a lie detector. The idea behind that device is that a person cannot tell a lie without the heart beating a little faster and the pulse rate turning slightly upward.

There are those who claim they can beat the polygraph test. Maybe they can; I don't know. I do know that none of us can beat the moral law. Wrongdoing carries with it many sad consequences, one of the worst of which is this - a life of moral failure is a life filled with fear. If any person wishes to rise above fear and gain a victory over it, then he or she must fulfill some serious conditions. And the first of these is an open, honest and upright life.

But that, of course, is not the entire story. To suggest that all fear is a derivative of sin would be a distortion of truth and a disservice to some very fine people. There is another wide area of fear that is caused by trying to face the strain of life with inadequate spiritual resources.

Those disciples who had locked themselves in that room were also dealing with that. Not only had they lapsed into moral failure, but their faith had failed as well. With the death of Jesus, the things they believed in and were building their lives upon had fallen apart. It seemed to them that God, himself, had failed; and they knew not where to turn or what to do.

How many people today find themselves in a similar circumstance? Sometimes it seems that our world has gone absolutely insane, that nothing makes sense, and that no one can do anything about it. It is scary business to live in a world like that. And the only thing I know that will change it is a renewed faith in God.

This was what made the difference for those first disciples. When the risen Christ walked into that room and back into their lives, it did something for their courage that nothing else could have done. They still lived in the same world. It was just as cruel and just as crazy as it had always been, but the risen Christ was a clear announcement that God was still in charge. And that was all they needed to know. Armed with that assurance, they could face the dangers of life with unwavering confidence. One of them wrote about it years later, and here is what he said: “The power that has conquered the world is this faith of ours.”

When a man has that kind of spiritual resources, he can handle anything that life may bring his way. There is only one place to find it, and that is through faith in God. Nothing else can make sense of this crazy world. Nothing else can give us the necessary strength to face up to life with all of its uncertainties, dangers, and difficulties.

In closing, I mention one other factor in overcoming fear, and it is love.

Of all the emotions that were flooding the hearts of the disciples in that upper room, one of them had to be bitter resentment. They must have despised the religious leaders and the soldiers who had crucified their Christ and destroyed their hopes. Perhaps, they even harbored thoughts of revenge. Then Jesus appeared and began to talk to them about forgiving people of their sin. They saw no bitterness and resentment in him. He showed no attitude toward his enemies except the same goodwill he had always shown. And without that same spirit of love, you and I will never successfully conquer fear in our lives.

What are some of the things we are afraid of this morning? We are afraid of other people, afraid they will take advantage of us, afraid they will get what we want, afraid they will make us look like fools, afraid they will win and we will lose. Jealousy, envy, and resentment are forms of fear. And the only thing that can cure them is love.

We have talked about three things - an upright life that has nothing hidden, a strong faith that holds on to God, and an indestructable love that includes even our enemies. The sum total of those three is a life that conquers fear. **Amen.**