

Peace Over Fear

Easter 2 B
John 20:19-23

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11 April 2021

The gospel that I just read begins by describing the situation of Jesus' disciples prior to his visit with them following his resurrection. "It was evening on that day," says verse 19, meaning that first Easter day, the day Christ was raised from the dead. "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." Why? "For fear," it says. Fear of what? For fear that the same Jewish authorities who had arrested, condemned and crucified Jesus would come for them next.

The disciples were locked up behind closed doors out of FEAR. Fear was central on their minds. Fear had overtaken their lives. Fear so palpable that you could cut it with a knife.

Now let me stop right there and ask you, how powerful can fear be when it overtakes someone's life? How all-consuming and mind-altering can fear be when it comes upon you? Does fear help you to have a clear head and make wise and temperate decisions, for example? Does fear assist you in loving your neighbor and being godly and loving in all your ways? Generally not.

Quite the opposite, in fact. Fear is very self-concerned. And fear can lead people to do some very unwise and unloving things, including making some choices that they might not otherwise choose had they been free of fear. Even worse, when fear is linked up with a group of people, it can result in mobs and violence such as was demonstrated in the storming of the US Capitol back on January 6. I've been wanting to talk to you about fear as a negative motivator ever since that happened.

What brought it back to my for me was a historical novel that I've been reading about Jewish people living in the Middle Ages in Europe. It's told from the perspective of a Jewish woman growing up as a rabbi's daughter in France, then marrying and raising a Jewish family. As historical novels go, it relates many stories that were true events, but fills them out with dialog and perspective from those who might have lived through those experiences.

Well, this past week I read the story of something that happened in the English town of Lincoln in the summer of 1255. It seems that an eight or nine-year-old Christian boy by the name of Hugh had not come home for supper on the last day of July, and of course his family had become quite fearful for the boy's welfare. It was reported that the lad had last been seen playing with some Jewish boys in the Jewish section of the town, but an investigation by local authorities did not turn up anything that was helpful.

A whole month passed by without word about little Hugh, which had the whole community on edge. In other words, fear took over everywhere. Fear in the Christian

community, because rumors and suspicions about those “awful Christ-killing Jews” had circulated in Christian circles for years. Fear in the Jewish community because Jews had too often been the target of discrimination at the hands of majority Christians.

On August 29, the body of little Hugh was found by a Jewish woman at the bottom of a well in her own back yard. Everyone’s worst fears came to the fore at this point. It became an immediate confirmation in the minds of the boy’s family and the whole Christian community as to just how awful these Jews were -- no one ever considering for a moment that this might have been an accident. And the Jews in the house where the well was and the whole surrounding Jewish neighborhood knew that they were just about to go through yet another great trauma and test of their faith.

The authorities initially arrested the owner of the well and his family and a handful of Jewish neighbors, about nine people in all, including men and women. They led them first to the cathedral, and then deep into a castle, and selected the owner of the well to be interrogated first.

Now it’s important to understand here that “interrogation” in this period was an “inquisition” by priests of the church, whose methods included torture and violence. And these would have been applied because of the expected “evilness” of all Jews. So it’s clear from the outset that they were looking for a particular “confession.”

Well, the Jewish owner of the well was not the strongest of men when it came to resisting torture in order to hold to the truth. The truth was that neither he nor his family nor anyone in the Jewish community had anything to do with that boy falling into the well. But when you are being stretched on a rack and beaten to a pulp and your arms and legs being broken, what would you do to avoid any more torture? Especially when you are being told that if you confess, you and your family and friends can go home.

The man broke and “confessed.” He knew exactly what these fearful Christians wanted to hear, and he gave it to them. He told them that he and his Jewish friends had set out purposely to kidnap a Christian boy and to torture him and eventually kill him in a ritual sacrifice, and then drink his blood before disposing of the body in the well. It was indeed what the inquisitors wanted to hear, so the man and the others were set free.

But the peace in the Jewish community didn’t last long. The English King heard about this, and thought it a complete miscarriage of justice. So he stepped in and had the authorities round up more than 90 Jews from the Lincoln community, and ship them off to London for trial in the ritual murder of little Hugh – now being called little Saint Hugh, as the Lincoln cathedral set up a shrine to his memory as a Christian martyr.

The trial in London included opportunities for rabbis and Jewish scholars to explain that the man who was tortured lied and that Jewish traditions never include ritual sacrifice. But that did not persuade the king, who insisted that a representative 18 out of the 90 Jews arrested be condemned and hanged.

What’s notable is that the 18 men chosen for death were some of the most prominent and richest Jewish men of Lincoln. That’s noteworthy because English law dictated that the property of any Jew convicted of a crime became the property of the crown. So much was the king pleased with his newfound wealth, that he rounded up and hanged 79 more Jewish men for the same offense a short time later. Such is the historical story of little Hugh of Lincoln.

Why do I tell this story? Because it is a story of fear running rampant and destructive. It’s a story of how irrational fear can set us up to literally hate and

demonize other people who don't deserve such demonization. It's a story of how fear can posture us to accept lies and rumors as absolute truth when they are nothing of the sort.

It's also a story about how inciting fear among people can bring political and even monetary gain to those in positions of power. It wasn't just the King of England who enriched himself from fabrication and discrimination. Even the Lincoln Cathedral became the beneficiary of pilgrimages and donations that were highly profitable in that day and age when you had a popular saint and martyr whose bones lay in a shrine within your walls.

I also tell this story because I have certainly become aware since the attack on the US Capitol on January 6 just how much fear has become a part of the political landscape in our nation. It is quite clear that politicians are not shy about trying to whip up as much fear as possible in order to sway people in their direction for their own political and maybe even monetary gain. So do left-leaning and right-leaning 24-hour news channels. I've told you before, 24-hour news is not your friend.

Even worse, as far as I am concerned, is to discover just how much individuals among us seem to actually NEED that fear in their lives for whatever reason. I ran across this in my neighbors in Pinellas in the days following January 6. It was quite obvious that some didn't trust anybody or anything, because as far as they were concerned, "they're all out to get you." And that means you can't believe anything you read or hear in the news – with the exception of your favorite commentator, of course -- because everyone else is "out to get you."

Fear. Cold, hard fear. Cold and irrational fear that can drive people to places they would not otherwise go, and to believe things that they would otherwise never believe.

Fear is what was being experienced in that house where the disciples were all locked in on that first Easter evening, says John's gospel. Fear, cold, hard fear.

Into the midst of THAT comes the risen Jesus. And his first words were these: "Peace be with you." It must have been a shock to the disciples. Could this really be Jesus? Alive? Raised from the dead? A fearful mind can hardly come out of itself to grasp it all.

Which is why Jesus' first words were these: "Peace be with you." In fact, he said it twice. He shows them the wounds in his hands and his side so that they know that it is truly him. And then he says it again. "Peace be with you."

It was not unlike what he had said to them just before his crucifixion. "Peace I leave with you," he told them. "My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27).

Even at the Sermon on the Mount, one of Jesus' earliest lessons for his disciples, he said, "Do not worry about your life.... Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (Matt.6:25-27).

Jesus is clearly inviting us into a posture of peace that derives from faith. That is a posture in which worry and fear have no place, because we place all our worries and fears into the hands of the Father who can deal with them in ways that we surely cannot. That is a daily walk that is the walk of faith, not fear – a walk that has a positive

outlook on life, not a constant negative and fearful expectation. That is a daily walk that steers you away from those who would benefit from having you be fearful and not filled with peace and faith. That is a daily walk and posture that comes straight from the risen Christ and places all its trust in God.

So how will you choose to live your life, Christian? It's a very pertinent question in this time of division and polarization in our country. There are plenty of players out there on the world stage who would benefit from your fears, and who would love for you to latch onto some fiction that they have invented so that you and others can be their unwitting pawn to tear apart the fabric of our society. They are calling you to believe in their dark purpose with your fear.

But the risen Christ calls you to another place. Christ calls you to another posture in life. Christ's call and wish for you is peace. Peace over fear. Let us walk therefore in faith, not in fear – and trust in God utterly.