

Date: April 8, 2018

Scripture: John 20:19-31

Title: FEAR BEHIND CLOSED DOOR

Fear is the very opposite of the faith to which Christ has called us. Today's lesson from John's Gospel tells us that "on the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."

We can identify with these anxious, fearful disciples of Jesus. John says, the doors were shut, "for fear of the Jewish leaders." It's tragic any time the doors of the church are shut because of fear. There was a time when many churches were never locked. Few churches would risk that today.

It's tragic when fear shuts the door of a person's heart. That happens to people. They draw into their own private worlds because something "out there" is just too threatening.

John says that the disciples were behind closed doors because of "fear of the Jewish leaders." There's no indication in the Scriptures, that such fears were justified. There's no evidence that the violence of that terrible weekend went beyond the torture and death of Jesus. But there were rumors. It's always that way. Whenever there is conflict between rival groups, rumors fly. Fear escalates. Reason is suspended.

Sometimes the results of such rumors are relatively mild. In a 1973 comic monologue on *The Tonight Show*, host Johnny Carson repeated a rumor that had been making the rounds in local newspapers. The rumor was that local stores were running out of supplies of toilet paper. That week, millions of shoppers ran out and stocked up on extra toilet paper, just in case the rumor was true. It was a national phenomenon. Just the rumor of a possible toilet paper shortage almost led to a real toilet paper shortage all over the U. S.

Rumors can sometimes provide us with a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rumors fly that the country is running out of toilet paper and, because of the fear generated by the rumor, people start buying it up and soon the country nearly does run out of toilet paper. But sometimes, the power of idle rumors can have much more tragic consequences.

The late columnist and author Nell Mohney was for many years a popular religion writer for the Chattanooga, (TN) *Times-Free Press*. One of her stories goes back to her college days at a small liberal arts school in Greensboro, North Carolina. There was a girl in that college named Amy Pruett. Amy was a junior transfer from a prestigious school in the East. Mohney said that she and her friends immediately assumed that Amy had failed to make it in her fancy Eastern school. They concluded that Amy probably

felt that a small Southern school would be a “push-over” for her and that’s why she transferred to their school.

But, Amy’s participation in class, proved that their assumptions were wrong. She was extremely bright and very capable, but that didn’t change her classmates’ behavior toward her. Amy was a very talented person but she wasn’t well-liked. Mohny and her friends did nothing to help the situation. They consciously rejected her.

Mohny wrote that, in retrospect, she realized that it was a mixture of prejudice and envy on their part. In actuality, they envied her looks and how she “over-dressed” in expensive clothes. Amy’s Northern accent and her no-nonsense, straightforward manner were certainly not appreciated in that small Southern college. These girls had been trained to believe that ladies should be soft-spoken, genteel and indirect, not assertive.

As time went on, rumors flew because she left school every Friday after classes and didn’t return until late Sunday night. After Thanksgiving another ugly rumor began that Amy was having an affair with an older man, who picked her up each Friday afternoon, and returned her to campus late Sunday evening. It was thought that he was married and that “for services rendered” Amy was given the beautiful clothes and spending money. The wall dividing Amy from her classmates was growing even taller.

After Christmas, news spread rapidly through the girls’ dorm and across the campus that Amy Pruett lay in a Greensboro hospital near death from an overdose of sleeping pills. The school psychologist called the students together and told them the real story. Amy’s mother was dying of cancer. Amy was lonely and friendless on campus. She was the only person assigned to a single room that year.

Nell Mohny’s words tell it best. “The shy but brilliant only child of wealthy parents, Amy had returned home from Vassar to be near her mother during her terminal illness. That’s why she had transferred to their school. It was . . . traumatic to leave her friends . . . as well as to face her mother’s impending death.” Mohny continued, “it became an almost impossible situation when she met our walls of prejudice and hostility. But it was the ugly rumor that pushed her over the edge. After all, the older man who transported her to and from the campus each week was her father.”

As you can imagine there was an outpouring of anguish and repentance across the campus following that revelation. Fortunately Amy recovered and her new classmates, now her friends, had a second chance to take her into their social groups and their hearts. But Nell Mohny never forgot the devastating power of rumor.

Idle rumors can ruin a life. They can start a rebellion. They can trap good people behind closed doors because of fear. There was no evidence that the Jewish leaders intended any harm to Jesus’ followers, but there were rumors and that was enough to destroy the sense of well-being for those first followers of our Lord.

We should be able to identify with those early disciples. There’s much fear in our society. That fear, is often fed by rumor. We have perfected the rumor mill in our

society. We have the press. No paper or television station wastes ink or air time on good news. Bad news IS good news for the nation's media. A steady stream of bad news feeds many people's fears. Fear can be so irrational. **The disciples were hovering behind closed doors because of rumors and they had temporarily misplaced their faith.** The disciples were not atheists or agnostics, that Jesus had recruited. They were not religious scholars by any means, but they had some familiarity with the Psalms. They probably grew up reciting, "The Lord is my shepherd . . ." in their synagogues. They were familiar with Joshua and Moses and the other heroes of the Old Testament. They knew that the Lord was the Rock of their Salvation who would never forsake them. Where was their faith now, the faith that had sustained them from the time they were infants?

Besides, they had been with Jesus. Some of them for three years. How many times had Jesus told them not to be afraid? Someone has noted that there are 366 "Fear not!" verses in the Bible, one for each day of the year and an extra one for Leap Year! Didn't any of it rubbed off on them? A time of crisis came and they had gone back to acting as they did before Jesus ever called them to follow him. Where was their faith?

It's like that small boy who was riding a bus home from Sunday school. He was very proud of the card he had received that day in class which had a picture and a caption that read: "Have Faith in God." Then to his dismay the card slipped from his hand and fluttered out the window. He cried, "Stop the bus! I've lost my 'faith in God!'"

The driver pulled the bus to a stop, and as the boy climbed out and went to retrieve his card, one of the adult riders smiled and made a comment about the innocence of youth. A more perceptive adult observed, "All of us would be better off if we were that concerned about our faith."

Under stress, something like that often happens to us. We temporarily misplace our faith and go back to acting as if we never heard the Gospel. We do this even though we know that faith is our greatest ally. Those who trust in a good and just God never lose hope. They are perennial optimists. Such faith not only makes us easier to live with, but is also of great benefit in dealing with some of our greatest fears.

Henry Ward Beecher once said, "Every day has two handles; we can take hold of it with the handle of anxiety or the handle of faith." The disciples had hold of the handle of anxiety. They were hiding behind closed doors because of unfounded rumors. They were hiding because they had temporarily misplaced their faith. **Mainly, they were hiding behind closed doors because they felt abandoned.**

There was something about the presence of the Master that gave them a sense of calm even in the presence of imminent danger. There was that time that he calmed the storm and walked out to the boat where they were huddled. The first words he spoke were: "Fear not. It is I." Where was he now? Crucified. Body stolen from the tomb. Absent from them in flesh and in spirit. There they were, sheep without a shepherd,

children whose parents had abandoned them and left them to face the cold cruel world on their own.

Psychologists tell us that deep in the hearts of many children is the fear that when their parents leave them somewhere, they're never coming back. That fear continues with us over a lifetime. This is one of the most crippling results of divorce, on some children. "Why has Daddy or mommy abandoned me? Doesn't he/she love me anymore?" Teenagers have much of the same devastation when called upon to handle the death of a parent. We're usually not aware of it, but that emotion stays with us through our entire lives. A new widow or widower will often have an overwhelming sense of abandonment. Such is also the experience of life without God. But God has not abandoned His people.

The story's told about a small village in Poland. It was on a Sunday and the people were in church worshiping, when troops of the Third Reich swarmed into the village. The soldiers entered the church and ordered everyone outside. Then the troops set fire to the structure. The soldiers then pointed their weapons at the congregation.

But instead of shrinking in fear, these people began to sing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Remember, it was a German, Dr. Martin Luther, who wrote this hymn. The people in the congregation as well as the German soldiers grew up singing this hymn. The people sang a verse, and then went on to the next verse, waiting for the bullets. They truly expected that rifle fire would stop their singing. But the bullets didn't come.

Finally, looking around at the German soldiers surrounding them, they were astonished to see guns lowered and every hardened Nazi face, streaming with tears. The soldiers, one by one, two by two, slowly turned and climbed back into their trucks and jeeps. They pulled away from the little town. The soldiers left behind a congregation of the faithful, standing outside their burning church, singing.

The disciples huddled behind closed doors because they felt abandoned. But they were not abandoned. **Christ can penetrate the closed doors of our lives.** The best antidote I know to fear, is to experience the presence of the Risen Christ, to see the marks of his love in his hands and side, to hear him say, as he said to those early disciples, "Peace be with you." Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.