4-19-20 online “Faith When You’re Afraid” Rev. Amy Haines

John 20:19-23 Easter Season

What are you afraid of today? Speak your fear aloud, or name it on the feed.

Are you afraid of the long-term impact of this virus, the impact to life, to health, to finances, to businesses, to church? Are you afraid of loneliness or death? Are you afraid of spiders or the dark? Are you afraid of letting others down, or not doing something good enough? Are you afraid to step out in faith, or afraid of the unknown?

Fear is a common human emotion. Yet, too often, we allow our fears to hold us back.

Last fall I was at a retreat where we were encouraged to name our fears, then name what was the worst that could happen if our fears came true. Often, those fears we named that day were not as bad as what we made them out to be.

As Rudyard Kipling once said:

Of all the liars in the world, sometimes the worst are our own fears.

--thepastorsworkshop.com:fear

Dare I confess today that one of my fears is being on camera? I hate to see myself on video!

I’m always afraid I will say the wrong thing or do something that makes me look like a fool.

I’m always vainly afraid my hair is sticking up or I’ll have a spot on my shirt.

Now I’m facing this fear at Annual Conference, sitting beside Bishop Palmer, never knowing when I will be on camera, and now I’m facing this fear going live for worship each and every week. I guess the worst the world will see is me being human!

Our fears often entice us to “Flee everything and run.”

We want to avoid conflict. We want to hide behind our locked doors and never come out. We want to evade the reactions of others who might look down on us.

Today, however, I invite you to switch up your definition of fear. To move beyond fear to faith.

For today, God invites us to “Face everything and rise.”

“Face everything and rise.”

This was also the message to the disciples of Jesus on that first Easter.

This is the message that we will reflect on throughout this Easter season.

“Face everything and rise.”

Move beyond fear and doubt, move beyond the loss of sight and the loss of energy. Have the faith to follow Jesus, now crucified and risen.

When the day dawned on that first Easter, Jesus’ disciples were overwhelmed with grief, confusion and fear. Resurrection was the furthest thought from their minds. While still gathered together in Jerusalem, they cowered behind locked doors.

They didn’t understand how everything had gone so wrong in the past week, how cries of “hosanna” had turned to cries of “crucify him.” They didn’t understand how one of their own had betrayed Jesus. They were afraid that if Jesus could be arrested and killed, their lives were also in danger. They were afraid that the religious leaders would also arrest and kill them. Their grief was also tinged with guilt, for even though they had pledged to stand with Jesus, at his most crucial hour they all fled, running in fear for their lives.

When the women returned from the tomb early on that Easter morning, returning in fear and great joy with the message that Jesus was alive, the disciples didn’t know what to think or feel.

How was resurrection possible? The tomb, empty? Jesus, alive?

They wanted to believe, yet fear mingled with hope. They were still too focused on the cross to accept the resurrection.

Have you ever struggled to move beyond the cross? Have you ever been bogged down by the weight of your sins, forgetting that through the cross and empty tomb those sins have been forgiven? Have you ever struggled with the good news of resurrection being too good to be true? Have you ever refused to believe that the good news of new life is good news for you?

Lavon Brown shares that:

“Every year thousands of people climb a mountain in the Italian Alps, passing “the stations of the cross” to stand at an outdoor crucifix. One tourist once noticed a little trail that led beyond the cross. He fought through the rough thicket and, to his surprise, came upon another shrine, a shrine that symbolized the empty tomb. It was neglected. The brush had grown up around it.

Almost everyone had gone as far as the cross, but there they stopped.

Far too many have gotten to the cross and have known the despair and the heartbreak. Far too few have moved beyond the cross to find the real message of Easter, the message of hope from the empty tomb.”

-Lavon Brown, p. 164, Illustrations Unlimited, adapted

The disciples struggled on that first Easter to move beyond the agony of the crucifixion to the glory of the resurrection.

In our Scripture today, this is where we find the disciples on that Easter evening. Gathered together in grief and fear and struggling hope behind locked doors. Suddenly, behind those locked doors, Jesus appeared among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

Peace be with you…in the midst of the storms and struggles of life, know that God is there.

Peace be with you…even though you deserted and denied me, I still love you and forgive you.

Peace be with you…you may not be perfect, but I still invite you to follow me and be my disciples in this world.

Peace be with you…

Notice that Jesus does not condemn nor shame nor speak words of disappointment to his disciples. Rather, he speaks words of acceptance, of forgiveness, of hope. Peace be with you…

Jesus showed the disciples his hands and his side, bearing the marks of the nails and the spear.

Jesus forgave them then blessed them then commissioned them to be his witnesses, with the breath of the Holy Spirit. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Jesus invited the disciples to have faith beyond their fears, to “Face everything and rise.”

Their fears of repercussion from the authorities didn’t disappear. Their fears of letting Jesus down didn’t disappear.

The good news of resurrection hope doesn’t magically erase all fears. The invitation to face everything and rise doesn’t remove the desire to flee. Rather, the promise of resurrection is the promise of God with us.

God promised to be with the disciples as they were now expected to get up and continue on, proclaiming in word and action Jesus’ message of God’s love, forgiveness, and grace.

God promises to be with us, as we continue on our journeys of faith, as we are called to follow Jesus, sharing in word and action the good news of God’s love, forgiveness and grace.

As we go, Jesus also says to us, Peace be with you.

This peace is more than a blessing. This peace is not merely the absence of conflict.

Instead, this peace is the gift of God’s own presence with us. This peace is the gift of Jesus with us no matter what we face, calm or conflict. Today we may find it hard to live by faith rather than fear, by peace rather than struggle. We are encouraged to focus on what divides us rather than what we hold in common. We are inundated with stories that feed our fears rather than words of encouragement.

Yet when we follow Jesus, Jesus offers us the strength of his peace, the gift of his presence, for whatever we may face! His peace assists us in living by faith.

We claim this peace through claiming the good news of Easter—Jesus is alive! He has already conquered sin and death. He is alive, and with us, in all that we face.

Where have you encountered God with you this past month? In what way have you felt the peace of Jesus with you, helping you to live by faith rather than fear? After this service, share your story on our Facebook feed, or call up a friend and tell them the good news of God with you, or email me your story.

Today, God invites us once again to follow Jesus as his disciples. Today, God invites us to live as those empowered by the holy spirit to love God and love neighbor. Today, God invites us to live as those centered in peace in the midst of the storms of life that surround us. Yes, we will still battle our fears.

Yet even in the midst of fear, we are called to faith. To trust and know that God is with us. To center ourselves in the peace of God’s presence with us. To go where Jesus calls us.

Today, God invites us to face everything and rise. So go, and

Rise in hope. Rise in trust. Rise in faith.

God is with us! Thanks be to God.