

“When it was evening on that day,” our text from the Gospel of John begins today. That day was the day when Jesus rose from the grave. That day was the day when Mary Magdalene ran to tell Simon Peter and John that the stone had been rolled away. That day was the day when these two disciples ran to the tomb and found only linen wrappings lying where Jesus’ body should have been. That day was the day when hearing her name, Mary’s tears were turned to joy for she recognized the risen Christ. That day now is the day when people flock to churches around the globe to celebrate with family and friends that Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

But, our text tells us that the sun was setting on that glorious first day. Listen now for the story of our faith as it continues to unfold...

Read John 20:19-31

Let us pray...

Holy One, we desperately want to claim the peace that you offer our lives, yet like the disciples we often find ourselves locked in fear. Breath on us, breathe in us your life-giving peace, we pray. Amen.

This Sunday after Easter we find ourselves in the midst of fear. The fear that gripped the disciples. The fear that grips our world. This past Friday, a Taliban attack on an Afghan Military Base killed 140, as an act of retaliation. North Korea flexes its military muscles and Russian military planes fly near our Alaskan borders. Thousands marched on Saturday, because there is no Planet B, there is only one earth and we must steward it well. Just 13 days ago violence entered a classroom in San Bernardino, taking the life of a teacher and a student, before the gunman killed himself. Just eight days ago there was a shooting across the street from Redlands Community Park. Each time we travel through airports, we are reminded to report unattended luggage for fear that it may cause carnage.

Locked in fear doesn’t seem that unreasonable given the climate of our world. Locked in fear didn’t seem that unreasonable for the disciples either, for their beloved teacher had just suffered the cruelest of deaths and they knew they could be next, if those in authority knew their association. When it was evening on that day, that first day of the week, the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked out of fear. (Pause)

Locked in fear is what we would expect of our Coptic brothers and sisters in Egypt, as well. Yet, Easter services were celebrated as planned, even though on Palm Sunday forty of their brothers and sisters in Christ were killed in two separate bombings. Churches in Alexandria and Tanta experienced the horror of violence in the midst of worship. Yet, the Christian church in Egypt wasn’t locked in fear behind closed doors, afraid to gather on Easter morn. The Christian church in Egypt gathered and worshipped the One who said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” They gathered and worshipped the living God who had conquered the cruelty of death through the cross.

Let me share with you some of the interview Katja Buck, a German political and religious scholar with more that 15 years of experience studying Christians in the Middle East, had with Bishop Thomas of the Coptic church of Upper Egypt.

Buck wanted to know how the church is dealing with the constant threat and how to avoid the hatred that can grow between Christians and those perpetrating violence

against them. Bishop Thomas said, “When there is a tragedy, [like these two recent church bombings], we tell our people not to be afraid of those who kill. Yes, they can take the body but what else can they do? They can’t take the eternal glory.” He reminds Buck that this doesn’t mitigate the pain and suffering, for he said, “Don’t think we don’t mourn... [senseless, violent] deaths, [yet they] remind us of the pain of the cross.”

As Easter people, Egyptian Christians know that the pain of the cross experienced on Friday is overcome by the glory of the risen Christ on the first day of the week. As we celebrated last Sunday and every Sunday when we gather to worship, the stone has been rolled away and only the linens are left in the grave. Christ is risen! Christ is alive or as Mary Magdalene said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” [Pause]

Have we claimed with confidence the power of the resurrection that Mary proclaimed for our own lives and for the life of this church?

In the interview with Katja Buck, Bishop Thomas refers to a tragedy in Libya where 21 young men were beheaded by religious extremists. Bishop Thomas reminded Buck, saying, “Don’t forget that those young men were tortured and threatened in an attempt to change their faith. But what these young men did was pray and lift their eyes all the higher,” like Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles. These young men had seen the Lord. Christ was alive in their lives, for Bishop Thomas said, “When you lift your eyes higher, things on earth appear smaller.” Like Peter in prison, these young men chose to pray to the One who was sovereign. Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, they said, “If our God who we serve is able to deliver us... let God deliver us. But if not, be it known... that we will not serve other gods.” These young men belonged to God whether they lived or whether they died, as Apostle Paul proclaimed to the church in Rome.

When it was evening on that day, that first Easter Sunday, the disciples had not yet claimed this truth for their lives. They were immobilized and locked in fear. Their fear was escalating with each passing moment. As David Schwartz wrote, “To increase fear – wait, put off, postpone.” They were waiting and “What ifs” were swirling in their minds. In their waiting, they probably imagined the worst. None of them expected sleep to come easy, figuring that they would toss and turn for days and weeks to come.

Into the midst of their very raw and real fear Jesus came. Jesus came and stood among them. Jesus’ first words weren’t “Get a grip,” or “Don’t be such wimps,” or “You of little faith.” No, into the midst of their very raw and real fear, Jesus spoke words of assurance, “Peace be with you.” Jesus repeats this phrase three times in our reading, so John clearly considers this assurance important. Before Jesus’ death, you might remember that he said to his disciples’ similar sentiments, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.” [Pause]

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” yet, how many of us have troubled hearts? “Do not let your hearts be afraid,” yet, how many of us have fears? How many of us increase our fears by waiting, putting off or postponing what needs to be done? How many of us fear rocking the boat or upsetting the way things are even if we don’t like them? How many of us are afraid of what others think about us, so much so we don’t try what we might very well be able to do? How many of us do not get involved out of fear

that it will require too much from us? How many of us fear rejection or ridicule or worse? “Do not be afraid,” said Jesus to the disciples.

Even though life for Coptic Christians in Egypt would give them every reason to be afraid and locked in fear, they are not. Jesus has met them in the midst of their fears and said to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Notice the subtle Pentecost in this chapter of John, “Jesus breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Jesus has breathed on the Coptic Christians in Egypt and they have received the Holy Spirit giving them the courage to address their fears by acting, by gathering to worship even in the face of potential violence, and by working together to address the injustices within their society.

“Peace be with you,” says Jesus to each of us. But, this peace is not just for those of us who receive it, for Jesus also said, “Just as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” The peace Jesus shares with us, is the peace we are to share with others. “So, I send you,” said Jesus to the disciples. [Pause]

All the disciples except Thomas witnessed Jesus that first evening. Yet, when the disciples went to Thomas and shared with him, “We have seen the Lord,” he did not believe. He declared that he wouldn’t believe unless, “He saw the mark of the nails in Jesus’ hands, and put his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in Jesus’ side.” Thomas needed to touch, to feel, to see the risen Christ. In today’s language, he was a physical or kinesthetic learner. Although, history has given Thomas the dubious adjective – doubting – Simon Peter and John were the first to doubt what they experienced. They saw the empty tomb with only linen wrappings left behind, but they didn’t know what to make of it the text tells us. Mary Magdalene gave an eyewitness account to the disciples, and doubt surfaced for on that first evening we still find them locked in fear.

Into the midst of the disciples’ very raw and real fear Jesus came. Into the midst of Thomas’ real and raw doubt Jesus came. Jesus doesn’t chastise doubting Thomas either. He simply says to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.” Jesus responded to Thomas’ need. Jesus met Thomas in his doubt, although he wasn’t going to leave him where he was found, for he said to Thomas, “Do not doubt but believe.” [Pause]

Fear gripped the disciples that first evening. Fear grips our world today. Fear may even be gripping your own life right now. Fear may also be part of our communal life as we imagine our future. Yet, can we receive Christ’s reassuring words with new purpose this morning? Can we receive the peace Jesus offers and respond with our very lives?

Jesus is meeting each one of us amidst our greatest fear, most pressing need or very real doubt, saying, “Peace be with you. Peace, not as the world gives, but as I give.” Yet, Jesus doesn’t leave us where he finds us, for he calls us to respond saying, “Just as the Father sent me, so I am sending you!”

I wonder where God is sending you? I wonder where God is sending us? I trust you sense the weight of Jesus’ words this morning. “Peace be with you,” even though we are sent as Jesus was, and he didn’t play it safe. “Peace be with you,” even though we are sent as Jesus was, and he met people in their deepest need – the blind, the destitute, the hungry, the sick, and even the dead. “Peace be with you, as you go into

the world, as I did," said Jesus. Demonstrate with your very lives the power of the resurrection!

Oft times we settle for a Christianity that is about personal salvation. Jesus and me are fine, so I am good to go. Notice the "I." Yet, this is not the gospel, for gospel pronouns are "us," "all," and "everyone." The gospel's focus is not individual, but communal.

Our Coptic brothers and sisters, by the power of the Spirit at work with them, will continue to gather to worship and to work together in the face of potential violence, because everyone in Egypt has not yet received the peace of Christ.

What about us? "Just as the Father has sent me, so I send you." Friends, we are being sent into our community to share the peace of Christ... even if we have fears, even if there are risks, even if it costs us... most likely not our lives, but our comfort, our time, our energy, our all. We are being sent though, by the resurrecting power of the Holy Spirit, which is able to grant us peace in the midst of challenges and adversity.

This first Sunday after Easter the question before us is this: Are you locked in fear or are you filled with the peace that Christ gives, ready and willing to be sent? I pray that we are willing to be sent, just as the Father sent Jesus. Amen.