

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

In these weeks of Eastertide, we focus on the resurrection of Jesus. Rightly so, for *“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.”* That’s what Easter is all about. And it takes more than one day to proclaim it. In fact, this is the proclamation that was on the lips of the Apostles as they spread out into all the world. Peter preached and the rest of the Apostles’ like him: *“you delivered [Jesus] over and denied [Him] in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. ... you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you ... you killed the Author of life, **whom God raised from the dead.** To this we are witnesses.”*

What bold witnesses to the message of the Gospel! But it wasn’t always so. And there were certainly dangers with this kind of preaching. If you read on in Acts—we’ll continue that reading next week in church—you will see that the same Jewish council that called for Jesus’ death was not happy about Peter’s preaching *“in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.”* They had the Peter and John arrested, and ordered them not to speak or teach of Jesus. But they kept preaching it: *“Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.”* To this powerful council they bravely said, *“We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”*

But, oh my! How different were these disciples of Jesus in those confusing and frightening days of Jesus’ arrest and passion and burial. There was fleeing and denying and weeping and hiding. What a transformation! From defeated disciples to daring disciples, audacious Apostles, persistent proclaimers of Jesus’ gospel: repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Now, it would have been hard to foresee that transformation from the resurrection appearances we’ve looked at thus far this Easter season. Besides the resurrection, if there is any common element in these accounts, it’s fear.

On that first Easter morning, the women went to the tomb. They saw the angel and heard His message, and they fled from that place for *“they were afraid.”* Last week, we heard of Jesus’ resurrection appearance to the disciples, and where were they before Jesus made His entrance? In a locked room, *“for fear of the Jews.”* And today, we hear of Jesus’ disciples discussing what two other of His disciples had reported to them, when all of the sudden Jesus appeared and stood among them. And sure enough. They *“were startled and frightened because they thought they saw a ghost.”*

Fear is a powerful emotion. When we’re afraid our brains are on high alert, watching out for any perceived danger. Our hearts beat faster, and we breathe faster, so that more oxygen is there as our bodies prepare for action—perhaps for

flight. Adrenal glands produce adrenaline. It's a powerful hormone that helps power our muscles to do great feats of strength and stamina.

On the other hand, fear can also be debilitating. It can paralyze us. It can prevent us from doing the right thing, like the one man in Jesus' parable of the talents, who knew his master was a hard man, was afraid, and hid the talent in the ground. Fear often keeps us from doing the right thing because we think it might be unpopular, because it's a hard thing to do, because it will set us apart from the crowd. One of our own members, who has been in battle many times and experienced battleground fear, has said to me, "*It's not that they're evil; they just lack courage.*" Fear stops them.

This is the kind of fear that the disciples experienced. They were afraid. Jesus their leader had been killed. Sure, He had told them that He would rise again from the dead on the third day, and that sounded nice, but who could believe that? After all that He had experienced on that cross? No, He was dead, and His disciples understandably thought they very well could be next. And so they locked themselves up in that room, hoping that they could just get through the next few days without riling up the Jewish leaders.

But that's where Jesus came in—literally—and He made all the difference. He appeared to Mary Magdalene first in the garden. He called her by name. He stopped her weeping. He transformed her fears into a joyful announcement: "*I have seen the Lord.*"

Later that evening the disciples were in the closed room, afraid. Jesus came in to them—literally—and stood among them. He assured them of the forgiveness of their sins. "*Peace be with you,*" He said and showed them His hands and feet and side—He was alive. He transformed their fears into gladness, and He transformed them into witnesses of the resurrection.

Today we learn that on that first night of His resurrection, Jesus did more than just come in to the disciples' room and show them His pierced hands and feet. He ate with them. Jesus was not merely a spirit without a body. He was raised from the dead, body and spirit. He transformed their doubts into faith. He opened the Scripture to them, and transformed their fears into understanding. He gave them a charge: be my witnesses. Preach the Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. Preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins. And He reminded them of a promise: the Holy Spirit and "*power from on high.*" And He transformed their idleness into action.

You are the fruit of their bold witness. That doesn't mean that you won't have your fears — we all do—fear of our own death, of mockery, of shame, of suffering for the sake of Christ; and yes, that can lead us to a similar kind of fearful inaction. Repent! And know that you are forgiven in Christ Jesus. More than that, the

resurrected Jesus comes to us today—literally, though not in exactly the same way as then. But He comes and calls you by name, for He knows you, for you have been incorporated into Him. The resurrected Jesus comes to us today and says, “*Peace be with you.*” He comes with a broken body, with blood still pouring from His wounds, with the forgiveness of sins that these wounds wrought for us, and we rejoice. He comes wrapped up in the word that bears witness to His work on our behalf — opened up to us that our doubts are answered, our faith strengthened, our fears transformed, and our witness emboldened.

This is the importance of the resurrection for us, too. For ...

I know that My Redeemer lives; What comfort this sweet sentence give! He lives, He lives who once was dead. He lives, my ever-living head.

He lives to silence all my fears; He lives to wipe away my tears; He lives to calm my troubled heart; He lives all blessings to impart.

He lives and grants me daily breath; He lives, and I shall conquer death; He lives my mansion to prepare. He lives to bring me safely there.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!