

*Sermon Fierce Fears, Wondrous Wounds*  
*The Second Sunday of Easter April 23, 2017*

Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jewish authorities, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then He showed them His hands and side. The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were exuberant. Jesus repeated His greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent Me, I send you." Then He took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," He said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?" But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master." But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in His hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in His side, I won't believe it." Eight days later, the disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then He focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine My hands. Take your hand and stick it in My side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe." Thomas said, "My Master! My God!" Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing." Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way He personally revealed it. John 20: 19-31

I hope you'll find a pen or a pencil to write with as we begin this sermon, "Fierce Fears, Wondrous Wounds" because there's a place in the bulletin to take some notes. This is the second Sunday of Easter, which is its own season, not just one Sunday. Last week the church celebrated the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and now we've all gone about our business. That is unless we return to the gospel, and find that the disciples - those who were following Jesus - have not gone about their business, and that little has changed for them in the past week. They are not even where we left them, marveling over the empty tomb and running to tell the others that Jesus has risen from the dead. They've regressed, and have gathered in a house with locked doors, because they are so afraid.

Easter takes a while... that's why it's a season and not just one glorious Sunday morning. We can't absorb all at once the good news that even death can't silence God's love and presence in our hearts, and in the world. Just as we as we ask ourselves over and over when we fall in love, "Is this real or am I dreaming?" We continue to ponder whether the miracle of Easter has changed us, and how we are in the world, or if this story is simply a story without the power to transform us. Our companions on this Easter journey of faith and doubt are the early church. These are the men and women who literally walked with Jesus, following Him, listening to His teaching, and sharing in His ministry. Some of them had encountered the Resurrected Jesus outside the tomb, and some had been told about it, and all of them were behind locked doors because they were afraid.

I understand the disciples being afraid after Jesus was crucified, when it seemed that all hope was gone, and when the future was unimaginable, and there was possibly another shoe to fall on those who had followed Jesus. I understand their fear. Just like some people struggle with depression or self-confidence or anger, I struggle with fear, and I have all of my life. I didn't know until recently, however, that fear (which is - or has been until now - my shameful secret) is what led me to Jesus, and I want to tell you what He's shown me about fear and about woundedness.

Sometime ago there was a questionnaire on Facebook for people to fill out and share with their friends. One of the questions was "What is your deepest fear?" Facebook is actually pretty "faceless" and people admit to things there that they probably wouldn't in a conversation. So it was interesting to read what people confessed to as their deepest fear. I didn't write that my fiercest fear is fear itself,

because that's something I'd rather than people didn't know about me (she said, in front of a congregation full of people.) I believe Jesus has prompted me to share about my fear and woundedness because He is in the healing business. He's healing me... and He wants healing and wholeness for all of us.

I wonder what the deepest fear was among the disciples, huddled together behind locked doors. Was it that the dream that "God's kingdom is very near" had died on the cross with Jesus? Was it the unpredictability of the people around Jesus, who one day threw palm branches on the ground in front of Him and shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of God!" and the next day were incited by the scribes and priests to shout, "Crucify Him!"? Was it wondering if Jesus' teaching meant anything now that He was gone?

Would you close your eyes and listen to the first sentence again from John's gospel? "Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jewish authorities, had locked all the doors in the house." Keep your eyes closed and imagine being there. The disciples were hiding. Behind locked doors. Because they were so afraid. Now picture doors that are locked in order to hide your deepest fear. Can you see the doors? Can you name the fear? Still with your eyes closed, hear the next two sentences from John's gospel. "Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, 'Peace to you.' Then He showed them His hands and side."

You can open your eyes. Jesus entered the house, through the locked doors, and greeted His friends with a word. "Peace." This is the word Jesus used to quiet the storm when the disciples were lying in the bottom of the boat on the Sea of Galilee, screaming in terror over the wind and waves threatening to submerge their fishing boat.

Jesus said to the storm, “Peace” and it quieted down. When the Resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples, coming to them through the locked doors, the disciples would have remembered that Jesus had commanded the wind and the waves. They had history with Him, and in that moment when it could have seemed that a ghost stood among them... they remembered that Jesus brought peace with Him. They’d experienced it, and could trust Him.

This is something Jesus has revealed to me when I am afraid. I have history with Him, and I’ve experienced Him calming the storms in me, and in other people and situations. I trust Jesus to bring peace to me. Do I forget it? (That was a rhetorical question.) I do forget. It’s human to forget the power and Presence of Jesus, and to believe that we are like the disciples lying in the bottom of the boat crying out in terror, alone and helpless. I invite you to write on your bulletin (and no one else has to see this) your fiercest fears. What’s the fearful storm that can rage in you? There isn’t a lot of space there but you might also write down a fierce fear, a storm, that Jesus has quieted in you. It helps to remember our history with Him, to remember our experience of His quieting Presence and His gift of peace. [wait]

Something Jesus has revealed to me about fear is that I can’t let it have the loudest voice, or the biggest presence in me. That’s Jesus’ job. My strength flows from Him, and when He and I are facing fear together, He gives me what I need to respond in faith. This isn’t unique to me... this is for all of us who worry or are afraid or are flawed and fragile human beings. We can learn to practice the Presence of God and let His peace flow into the wounds and cracks we all carry within. In Matthew’s gospel, during a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples went to Jesus who was asleep in the

boat, and they shouted, "Save us, Lord! We're going to drown!" When confronted or attacked by your fiercest fears, remember that the disciples went directly to Jesus and cast themselves on His Presence and peace. This is a gift He offers to everyone who knows Him... who has experience with Him.

The Christmas prophecies about the Messiah, the Savior, said that He would be called Emmanuel. During the Easter season, and as we find the disciples hiding behind locked doors out of fear, it's good for us to call to mind what Emmanuel means: God-With-Us. Nothing can keep Jesus' love and Presence from us: not the grave, not locked doors, and not our fiercest fears.

Many years ago I heard a pastor say that our deepest wound is also our greatest gift... which I thought was the stupidest thing I'd ever heard. (I was wrong.) I don't know what psychologists would say a wound is. I know a physical wound is something that we bind up or bandage. Perhaps an emotional wound is a deep hurt that we'd like to bandage or hide. An emotional wound can be something that makes us vulnerable, that causes us shame. There's no way to get through life without wounds. A wound is where there's a chink in our armor of pretended-perfect. "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

John's gospel tells us that the Resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples a second time. "Eight days later the disciples were [still] in the room." They hadn't made very much progress moving out of the room, moving out of fear. Thomas was with them this time, and he hadn't believed them when they said Jesus had appeared before. Thomas said, "Unless I see the nail holes in His hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in His side, I won't believe it." The wounded Jesus appeared again to

the disciples, and Jesus said to Thomas, "Take your finger and examine My hands. Take your hand and stick it in My side."

Jesus was both Christ and a human person, and wounded, as we are. Even after the resurrection, His wounds were visible to show the disciples that He lived our life and bore our wounds. Jesus is not some remote and invulnerable God, but the God who was wounded for us, and with us. Our woundedness is something that we have in common with Jesus, and with all humanity. Instead of hiding our wounds, if we talk about them, and how we got them, and how and where we need Jesus' peace and healing, can bring hope to other wounded human beings.

Another space to write in the bulletin is "What are my wounds?" Again, no one else needs to see this. The question right below it is "How can Jesus use my woundedness?" What if our wounds and cracks are how the light, the healing light of Christ, shines out of us? If we are self-sufficient and have everything we need, then we have no need, and no room for Jesus. Instead, our wounds make us human, and compassionate, and can witness to how Jesus is healing us and working in us. Take a minute to answer "What are my wounds?" and "How can Jesus use my woundedness?"  
[wait]

Thomas' words about putting his finger in the nail holes in Jesus' hands, and his hand in Jesus' side, are pretty icky. Our wounds and cracks can seem pretty icky to us too. But the wounded Jesus stands with us, and He isn't repulsed by our wounds. He is full of compassion for our humanness because He has shared it with us. Thomas' need to see Jesus' wounds is a reminder that nothing human is icky to God. Jesus is full of

love and compassion for us... and His desire is to use our woundedness to help others with the love and compassion He gives us.

At the bottom of page 2, there are two sentences beginning with the words, "Jesus repeated His greeting." When they read the gospel this morning, Missy and John read those two sentences together. I'd like us to read them together too. Starting with the words, "Jesus repeated His greeting" let's read to the top of the next page. "Jesus repeated His greeting: 'Peace to you. Just as the Father sent Me, I send you.' Then He took a deep breath and breathed into them."

Jesus gave the disciples (including us) a mission: to be full of love and compassion - to be full of Him - in order to forgive the sins of others. Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into the disciples. In the book of Genesis, in the story of creation, God created the first human being out of clay and breathed life into its nostrils. Here, the Risen Christ breathed His life into the disciples. There is no way we can follow Jesus on our own... on our own goodness, our own willpower, our own strength. We need to be filled with His breath, with the Holy Spirit.

The last space to write on in the bulletin asks, "Where do I need Jesus to breathe peace and healing in me?" Where in your life, in your attitude, in your relationships, do you need Jesus to breathe peace and healing into you? [wait]

Jesus continues to show me that fear is no match for His Presence. He shows me that my wounds and cracks are not something to be ashamed of, but something I have in common with Him, and with all humanity, and those wounds and cracks are where His light shines through me.

This is the Easter season, and we are the Easter people... learning, as the first disciples learned, to step away from fear and into faith, and into a world that is crying out to experience the peace and healing of Jesus. Please pray this prayer with me, either silently or aloud, as you feel comfortable. Let us pray: Jesus, with Your Presence and power, help me face my fears. Help me see that fear and woundedness keep me from feeling invincible and godlike. Teach me to rely on You for peace and healing. Thank You, Jesus, for sharing this human life with me. Fill me, Lord, with Your love and compassion for all people, so that I may continue to do Your work: bringing heaven to earth. We pray this in Your name. Amen.