

"Fear & Joy"

John 20:19-31 Thomas

MAR 30 2008

Easter 2A

Have you ever felt fear and joy at the same time?

How about the time you first got up on a bike without training wheels? I remember that moment so clearly. I got up on the seat and my Dad held me steady by the shoulders and gave me a little push. And I was moving, intense exhilaration and terrible fright all mixed into one single moment. And that look on your face, feeling like you were flying through the air like Superman, but knowing you were just one small twitch from falling flat on your face! Fear and joy at the same time.

I've seen that look on the faces of those who stand right here on their marriage day. I've never seen a bride faint at her wedding, but the grooms, that's another story. And just before they lose their balance, just before the best men catch their elbow before the grooms hits the floor, is that same combined look of ecstatic joy and paralyzing fear. Down they go! In twenty five years I haven't seen one bride lose altitude at that critical moment.

Fear and joy at the same time? I think about the time I was hiking in the Grand Canyon, the most beautiful place on the planet. The view in every direction was incredible, but I was scared out of my wits because my left hiking boot had broken apart and was held together by safety pins and a packing strap and my friend Gary was having so much trouble breathing with his one lung that he could hardly walk twenty feet at a time, and we had to climb up 5000 feet to get out of the Canyon. I have no idea what the expression on my face looked like, but inside I know what it felt like, life and death wrestling inside my stomach - victory or doom about to claim my life.

Fear and joy at the same time? Maybe it's the new parents holding the new born baby and feeling all the joy in the universe, but then the fear sets in - can we be responsible enough to raise this child, what if I don't have enough love or patience or wisdom?

Fear and joy at the same time? Can you think of such a time in your life? (Chrystal mentions "Roller Coaster" and Beth mentions "teaching your teenager to drive for the first time".)

The story in John's Gospel is about the disciples trying to grasp the meaning of what they have witnessed with the empty tomb. My sermon title is based on the mixture of emotions felt by the disciples in the hours and days after the resurrection: fear and joy all mixed up together at the same moment.

"Joy" we can understand and feel and explain because Easter is a happy time for us. Easter eggs and chocolate, family gatherings, spring flowers, life triumphing over death. Those are all of the components of joy.

One year, the church newsletter invited everyone to come to worship on Easter morning, "*come feel the joy!*". And we mean it; Easter is a time of joy.

The newsletter did not invite people to come on Easter by announcing "*Feel the Fear!*". Who would come to any church to feel fear? "Fear" doesn't seem to belong to a celebration of Easter, and is not usually what we expect to feel when we come to worship. But it's what the disciples were feeling along with joy. And it's a feeling we should give attention to if we hope to grasp the meaning of the story. If you can find a moment in your life where joy and fear happened to you at the same moment then you have an insight about those disciples.

Thomas is a lead character in this morning's story. The emphasis seems to be upon his unwillingness to accept the truth of the resurrection without clear physical evidence. But I think there's more to it. It's not only embracing the joy he felt when he saw the wounds in Jesus' hands, it's also his willingness to come to terms with how his life would never be the same. So what happened to Thomas? The resurrection opened up a completely unexpected future for Thomas.

I'm sure I've told the story before, but I love telling it. When I was a student pastor in New York City Mary John was a member of our church. She had come to New York from India. "*When did the missionaries come to your village?*", I asked her. She was nearly indignant as she said, "*Missionaries? It was the Apostle Thomas himself who first came to my village!*". I looked it up, and sure enough, the Church of South India, more than 1500 years old, claims that Thomas was the one with the heart and the commitment to go further than any of the other twelve, all the way to India. Maybe Thomas was afraid to believe the story of the resurrection because he knew that what he saw would change everything in his life. Fear and joy, Thomas felt them both, and out of both of those feelings he moved forward.

What did those disciples fear? The inexplicable? The mystery? The magical? The unbelievable? The future? Is there something we fear about Easter? I think that it's the fear that the story is really true. If so, it forces us to look at life and death, good and evil, light and darkness in a new way. There's no turning back once we look inside the tomb, and everything will look very different when we step back out of the tomb.

Joy and fear. Feel the joy of Easter, the hope, the promise, the possibilities. But also feel the fear, honest about how this story will do a lot more than warm our heart, it will launch us on a new adventure that we can only begin to imagine. Those twelve disciples changed the world. And there are more of us here this morning than twelve. Don't be afraid, and begin to imagine what we might do!