

Text: John 20:19

Theme: Conquering Our Fears

April 3, 2016

Ann Landers receives over 10,000 letters a month. What is by far the most common problem she is asked to address? Add to that a second question, which incidently has the same answer is: What is the root cause for over 90% of chronic health issues in our country today? The answer, which is found in our text is "fear." Fear hinders, immobilizes, makes us sick, and adversely affects our God-intended purpose for our very existence. Today, we endeavor to learn ways to conquer our fears.

I. Although created by our incredible Creator, we are plagued by fears. A. Like the disciples, we are fear-filled people. 1. We are fearful of what other people think. You can deny it, but it would only take a bit of effort to prove you wrong. What causes our fears? Expectations, job performance, status, how others perceive us. Every day we take a breath, fear finds a way to infiltrate our lives, to cripple us. The disciples should have been the most fearless people on the planet. Yet what we see as we step into their shoes, is fear oozing out of them like a mud ball being squeezed between our fingers. What others think cripples us more than we are willing to admit.

2. We are also fearful of living. If you thought being fearful of others didn't apply, this one pushes that envelope even more because we are afraid of what might happen next. We want control; we want to be in charge of our lives. Yet, life doesn't work that way. Like the disciples hiding behind locked doors, we, in our own way, hide from life because we're afraid of what might happen next. Jesus, Himself, says of us, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the fullest." That's His expectation, but daily we short change God; we live for the weekends, but we seldom live the abundant life because we've allowed fear to steal our very life from beneath our feet.

3. We are also afraid of dying. You've heard those people, "I'm not afraid of anything. I'm not afraid to die!" Yet put them flat on their back in the hospital with a critical illness and you will call their bluff every time. The fear of the unknown haunts us and debilitates us. We've been taught the truth well, but when push comes to shove, we fail to believe it because we haven't imprinted it on our hearts. If you want to find an impressive example of one who has no fear of dying, visit a faithful shut-in, one who has been here Sunday after Sunday, who would give anything to be here today. There you find the greatest examples of those for whom death has no fear.

B. Although we are surrounded by fear, Jesus calls us to conquer our fears. 1. We conquer our fears by returning to the cross. What makes Good Friday such a great moment? In that moment, sin, which perpetuates fear, met its conqueror. On Good Friday, fear itself was also nailed to that cross right next to Jesus. As His disciples huddled behind closed doors, they huddled because they disbelieved that fear had been nailed to that cross, that Christ on that cross had conquered fear, destroyed the ultimate fear, the fear of hell itself. As we return to the cross and acknowledge that there was no Easter morning for fear, we begin our journey toward conquering fear.

2. We conquer our fear by revisiting the empty tomb. Just last Sunday, we gathered in this place to celebrate the most glorious event in the Christian faith, the resurrection. We declared in our hearts that death along with fear and all its other cohorts had been defeated, that Christ had been victorious. That's the message that argues with fear, that debates with fear and wins every time. If Christ has the power to conquer death, does He not have the power to conquer any and every fear when we place our total trust in Him? Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! And because He is risen, fear is dead; fear is conquered; fear has been forever defeated.

3. We conquer our fear by mentally looking at the nail prints. We ridicule Thomas. Yet, that same Thomas lives within us. It's to our Thomas generation, to our Thomas hearts that Jesus says, "Look with your heart at the nail prints. I was dead, but now I am alive. Since I am with you, what reason do you have to fear?" As the apostles in our first reading were miraculously released from prison, they were told, "Go and stand in the temple and speak all the words of this Life." With those nail prints embedded in their minds, they boldly spoke. In that same way, with nail prints imprinted on our minds, we stand prepared for God to do something great through us.

4. We conquer our fear by increasing our faith. A Black American congregation had gathered to pray for rain because of a long dry spell. The preacher looked at his flock and said: "Brothers and Sisters, you 'll know why we is here. Now what I wants to know is—where is yo' umbrellas?" How often have we prayed without our umbrellas? As Jesus says, "O you of little faith," He could just as easily have been speaking to us. We have the evidence. What we need now is the faith to move in step with the evidence. The apostles in our first reading prayed expecting and God empowered them to do miraculous healings. As we increase our faith, we do so with our umbrellas in hand.

5. We conquer fear by stopping doubt in its tracks. If doubt had not swept through the disciples, would the doors have been locked? Would they have been sitting inside those walls? We've heard it, but it's worth repeating: Tell someone their are 581,678,934,341 stars in the universe and they will believe you. But tell them that bench has just been painted and they will have to touch it. How long will we touch the wet paint before we stop doubt in its tracks, before we bury doubt with a payloader bucket of, "Fear not for I have redeemed you. You are mine!" I still like the bumper sticker because it summarizes it so well, "God said it; I believe it, and that settles it!"

6. We conquer our fear by believing in the power of peace. As Jesus stood before His disciples, He wasn't confined to a limited vocabulary. Yet, on both occasions, Jesus spoke the same words, "Peace be with you." But why those words? Because peace sends fear running down the road. The peace of God living in our hearts has the power to keep fear out, and as long as fear is on the outside, fear is powerless. In this moment, Jesus offers peace. That peace that passes all human understanding, that peace is and always will be our best weapon to conquer our most debilitating enemy, to conquer doubt in its tracks.

7. Fear may be a popular topic, yet our God, who is standing at our side at this moment says, "Conquer it and you will experience what you desire most - the peace that passes all understanding." Amen.