

Psalms 118:14-29

<sup>14</sup>The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.  
<sup>15</sup>There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;  
<sup>16</sup>the right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly."  
<sup>17</sup>I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.  
<sup>18</sup>The Lord has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.  
<sup>19</sup>Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.  
<sup>20</sup>This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.  
<sup>21</sup>I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.  
<sup>22</sup>The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.  
<sup>23</sup>This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.  
<sup>24</sup>This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
<sup>25</sup>Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!  
<sup>26</sup>Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.  
<sup>27</sup>The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.  
<sup>28</sup>You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.  
<sup>29</sup>O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

John 20:19-31

<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

As our Gospel reading begins today, Jesus has been seen by Mary Magdalene and no one else. I want to begin with a disclaimer. John begins by explaining in today's reading that ten of the disciples had locked themselves in the Upper Room, for "fear of the Jews". This is kind of funny because each of the disciples and Jesus himself were all Jews. We do know that Jesus' proclamation to being the promised Messiah was not very popular among the temple leaders and so some of his fellow religious had been very unhappy with him. But, Jesus and all the disciple were Jews, so John's use of that term is a little bit unfair and a little bit misleading.

And it's important to note that by the time John's Gospel was written, it was some 50-60 years after the death of Jesus. During this period when the Gospel may well have been written the Romans had recently destroyed the temple of the Jews, so many of the Jews were essentially homeless and they were feeling pretty defensive. Before the temple was destroyed, some of the Jewish Christians had combined their Christian worship practices with Jewish practices. But this changed after the temple's destruction. The Sadducees, the priestly class, at this point lost their power structure. The Pharisee's, the rabbis, became more central to Jewish religion because they were the interpreters of Scripture and didn't need the temple quite so much as the Sadducees did. They were the teachers. THEY lived in the WORD of GOD rather than in the temple. With the temple gone both Jews and Jewish Christians needed to establish themselves within the Roman empire

in some new way and so this created more strife between them. When John uses the term “Jews” he is referencing the Sadducees and the Pharisees both, but he is excluding the Jewish Christians.

It’s important for us to keep in mind that this strife between the Jews and the Christians existed at THIS particular time back in 80 CE, and well after Jesus was gone and was a direct result of the temple being destroyed. The fear of the Jews referenced in John’s gospel had to do with the disciples fearing being thrown out of the temple or cast away from the Jewish faith they all knew for not believing in the proper way, in the eyes of the Sadducees. This fear has nothing to do with our acceptance and care for Jews living with us in this world today.

And the fear that the disciples felt serves as proof that the disciples had not believed Mary Magdalene’s testimony when she told them she had seen the Lord. It is almost as though Jesus knew they did not believe, so he went to them, to SHOW them that indeed, he had been resurrected. Otherwise, their fear might have kept them IN the tomb unable to step out to evangelize Jesus.

In the tomb. This is where we also often get stuck because of our fears. We let our fears get the best of us and then we neglect to follow through on Jesus’ call to love the Lord with our hearts, minds, souls and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

As Director of Youth Ministries at Avon Lake UCC, I took the young people on regular mission trips. One year we decided to go to New York City to work on Staten Island for an organization called Project Hospitality. After we’d made the arrangements, a few

parents commented to me, “Don’t you think New York is an awfully dangerous place to take the youth?” My own fear of that attitude had crossed my mind and I was afraid some parents might not let their children go. Now these were youth aged 12-18 and 3 adults. But, we decided to make the trip anyway. As it turned out, it was a wonderful experience. When we weren’t working for Project Hospitality weeding in the Women’s House Community Garden, or preparing sandwiches for the lunch give-away, or learning about the HIV/ AIDS Ministry done by PH, we were traveling around NY by subway or crossing back to Staten Island on ferry rides. It was fun. The kids had a great time. And as it turned out, only one young person had not been allowed to go. But, the people we encountered everywhere we went in NY were so nice and very caring and so appreciative of our work. We were to those in need, examples of the love of Jesus Christ. And so it may well be that the very best lesson we learned was that very often, our fears are unfounded and because of them we get stuck in our tombs; stuck in our Upper Rooms and miss out on wonderful, valuable experiences. If we had not ventured out of our comfort zone we might not have had that wonderful experience.

Sadly, we seem to have turned ours into a culture of fear. The TV news is still always only the “bad news” and for every bad thing that happens so many more good things happen; but we don’t talk about those good things. We have a habit of dwelling on the very worst news; the very worst stories. Granted, there are good reasons the news outlets spend so much time on the bad stuff and literally go out of their way to scare us. THIS seems to be what we want to watch. Being fearful somehow entertains and excites us. Perhaps being

fearful is a habit we've grown used to. And it makes me wonder what would happen if we turned off the news, new shows, violent dramas and instead only read about uplifting events; only read books that provided us with hope in the world. What if we only talked about the good in the world and refused to spend time focusing on what's so bad about our world.

I know. It wouldn't work in every life situation. Sometimes people we love get sick, and that surely is not good news. Sometimes bad things happen in our lives and it becomes difficult to be optimistic at those times.

Sometimes we just need to 'decide' to leave our toms. Sometimes we need to decide to leave fear behind and step out. So often we learn that there was really never anything to fear. And the truth is that GOD is always, always with us. Jesus, if we request his presence thru prayer will be there. I don't know about you but when I was a girl I had a few fears. They were fears that my parents, I'm sure, didn't really mean to instill but they did it anyway. One of those fears was of certain other people. Of just about anyone who was different than we were, and that was pretty much everyone. Only as I grew older and began to get to know other people, people who were different, did I learn that my fears were unfounded and unfair and they were essentially a waste of good energy.

I think sometimes the solution to our fear problems are very simple. We have to CHOOSE to do something about them- whether that means getting to know a different sort of person; one of those "others". Or whether it is just a matter of making a decision to change ourselves and to let go of our fears (because we ALL know that we can not change

others). And this reminds me of a silly little story that I will close with this morning.....

A man went to a psychiatrist. "Doc," he said, "I've got trouble. Every time I get into bed, I think there's somebody under it. I get under the bed, I think there's somebody on top of it.

Top, under, top, under ... you gotta help me, I'm going crazy!"

"Just put yourself in my hands for a few months," said the doctor. "Come to me once a week, and I'll cure your fears."

"How much do you charge?"

"A hundred dollars per visit."

"I'll think about it," said the troubled man.

Six months later the doctor met Stanley on the street. "Why didn't you ever come to see me again?" asked the psychiatrist.

"For a hundred bucks a visit? A friend cured me for ten dollars."

"Is that so! How?"

"He told me to cut the legs off the bed!" Most of us, though, have fears which are much more difficult to overcome -- fear of failure, fear of dying, fear of letting others down, fear of living alone, just to name a few. And, as you read through the Bible, you see that fear is not unique to those of us in the 21st century. One phrase that reappears over and over throughout the Bible is the phrase, "Do not be afraid."

So, the Jewish Christians in our reading today feared both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. And this fear kept them locked away in the upper room- except for Thomas. It is as though they completely forgot about what they learned as followers of Jesus about faith in him in the first place- Amen.

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I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. Fear is not my native land; faith is. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt and anxiety. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath--these are not my native air. But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely--these are my native air. A John Hopkins University doctor says, "We do not know why it is that worriers die sooner than the non-worriers, but that is a fact." But I, who am simple of mind, think I know; We are inwardly constructed in nerve and tissue, brain cell and soul, for faith and not for fear. God made us that way. To live by worry is to live against reality.

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