

A Guide to Wholly Living

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Text: Acts 9:36-43

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

On Easter Sunday, Pastor Jill reminded us that though Jesus' resurrection is many things, it is also an invitation to a new way of being in the world. We have spent time in this Eastertide season exploring our biblical texts as assurances of the joy that is to come. However, we have been reminded that with anticipating what has been promised to us brings up a question about what we do with the sufferings we encounter now. I think one such suffering we encounter now, or rather one such result of remaining broken in the world, is fear. I have noticed lately in what is going on globally, that we seem to be driven by our fears. It is a brokenness that has come to the forefront. We have been hearing rhetoric like fear of the "other", fear of persecution, fear of terrorism, fear of gun violence and it seems to be the underlying motivator for many Christians this Eastertide season. I would like to suggest based on the text in Acts that in order to be resurrection believers we must lean away from our fear and lean towards the promise of eternal life. And I would like to suggest that is one of the new ways Jesus has invited humanity to interact with the world.

Now I had a moment of facing my fears this past week. I am sure many of you don't know this about me, but I am a major arachnophobic. I am so afraid of spiders that I am paralyzed when I see one. I cannot even get within 3 feet of a spider, let alone close enough to one to kill it with a tissue or shoe. This becomes a problem when my husband is out of town, which happens often enough for this to be a real problem. So my husband was gone this past week, and we had done some shopping for some supplies so that I could handle the spiders by myself. I was pretty well equipped, so when I saw a spider in the crevis between the wall and the ceiling, I immediately inhaled sharply but calmly went on my way to get my killing spray.

So I went in, and sprayed him. I was promised this would kill on contact, but that was not happening. He gently fell from the ceiling onto the rug. I watched him fall and land on the rug. I then watched him walk around in a stunned state. He went around in circles for a while. And if you too are afraid of spiders, you know how chilling it can be to watch a spider crawl. But there I stood towering over him, knowing that I had every capability to end his little life. I suddenly I had no idea what I was afraid of. I was much bigger than he and he could not hurt me. I felt momentarily like I had conquered a fear.

Now I am not suggesting, and I want to my husband to hear this loud and clear, that I have not cured my fear of spiders. Nor am I suggesting that all phobias are that easy to face. Nor are all fears that easily conquered. I am afraid of many more things; of seemingly bigger things. I am afraid I will not get a job after graduation. I am afraid that I am going to lose everyone I love to cancer. I am afraid that this country will shut down its borders and we will become a threat to ourselves. I don't believe that we will be able to overcome all of our fears in this age. I don't

have a spray that will kill cancer on contact. I don't have a shoe that will squish my competition for jobs. We just simply don't have all the capacity within ourselves to stand over our fears and claim them conquered.

However, we do have one tool more powerful than anything else. In our text from Revelation, John is describing the heavenly realm using many rich images that have great significance. It takes a little bit of work for us to uncover some of those images and meanings. We have the image of palm branches, a sign of victory. We have the throne, the dwelling place of our Holy God right before our eyes. We have the image of white robes, showing that we have been made pure. We have end to the "great ordeal" which is persecution or suffering. What John is communicating is that God has won the victory, and our suffering will be over. There will be a day, we are promised, that we won't have to fear standing in the sun too long or being hungry. Our powerful tool is the resurrection of Jesus and it's promise that one day we will be united to Him. One day we will fear no more.

To the original readers, this was an encouragement. The characters we read about in the Scriptures were much more motivated than we are by the return of Jesus. The ancient church felt strongly that the return would be in their lifetime. Hanging on to this hope was what kept many Christians strong in the face of intense persecution and threats. We know many fears today, but the fear of persecution has got to be one of the greatest motivators for the actions of the ancient church.

The Acts story is set amongst some of the worst persecution Christians faced in the 1st century. In this story we see a vivid example of what it means to be living more wholly and not fearfully. Not to be motivated by fear, but to be motivated by hope. The church in acts is a resurrection community longing for the time when they can meet their Savior once more. That is what motivated them, not their fears. When Tabitha became ill and died, the community could have easily let her go. They could have accepted her death as the way things are. We are born, we live, and we die, and they could have just mourned. Tabitha was likely someone who lived on the fringes of society because she was a widow and a woman, so it would not have been unlikely to let her die. Instead, they sought a miracle for Tabitha. They sent for Peter. The community chose to have hope that God can do what He has promised to do. Their hope transcended their fears. Their hope is God, and that God is greater than all of our illness, brokenness and fears. Living more wholly means living more hopefully.

If we place this miraculous healing in the context of the hope described in Revelation, I think we see one important parallel. Living more wholly means living into the community of believers. John describes heaven as a place where we will see people from all tribes and nations, from all tongues and languages. Part of the joy we look forward to is seeing one another void of all of our fears. The members of the Acts church were vulnerable in their mourning and their hoping, but were unafraid of engaging in one another's vulnerability. Living wholly required they hold one another accountable to their hope. This is something we can cultivate now. This can be our new way of being the world. We can be a community that shares our joys and celebrations with one another, even if we are suffering. Community is how we feed ourselves in the in between of our own famine. We can also be a community that shares our fears and burdens with one another so that we can point one another to the hope of what is to come. We can encourage one another to

live more wholly. The emphasis of both Acts and Revelation is not a dichotomy between life and death, but points us to a community honing all of its spiritual energy away from fear and passionately towards one another to encourage a life of wholeness.

Communities are powerful healing agents. In our American context, or perhaps more specifically our Dutch context, we are far more comfortable with the idea of privacy and individualism. However, pulling away from others when we retreat into our fears is a damaging way to ensure we never come out. Theologian Fredrick Buechner says this about community and holistic living:

When it comes to putting broken lives back together the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do- to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst- is by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that is the same steel that secures your life against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.

Brothers and sisters, no good comes from steeling yourself against one another. No good is done in isolation. Isolation is where we got swallowed up by our fears and our actions become less than holy. Let us lean towards one another and push one another towards hope.

The text in Revelation talks about being thirsty and hungry, and having plenty to eat and drink. We are going to participate in the feast of communion this morning, which is a foretaste of the feast that is to come. It is a reminder of the endless bread and wine that is made possible only by the blood and body of Jesus Christ. This is something we partake in together in order to show that we are united as believers, and one day we will join in the eternal feast together.

The encouragement today is that God has promised us new life, and the challenge is that we let that be the motivator for our actions in this world, and that we would put down our fears, tower over them, and let them be conquered by the power of our resurrected Savior.

Amen.