

“The Things We Fear”  
Acts 2:14a, 22-32  
John 20:19-31

Jesus was sentenced to death. The religious leaders unjustly tried him. They feared Jesus, because of his influence on their religion. And Pilate was complicit. Jesus was crucified. That was Friday. But Sunday came. Death lost. Love won!

Thomas A. Miller is a surgeon and researcher. In his book, *Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead*, he examines the miracle of Christ’s resurrection from a medical perspective. According to Miller, the body contains trillions of cells. Each one of these cells carries out thousands of different chemical reactions. Thus a bodily resurrection would require

...some phenomenal power to energize life into all these individual cells, but it would have to do so in such a way that specialized nerve cells could resume their unique function, heart cells perform theirs, blood cells and bone cells do theirs, and so on... for the resurrection of Jesus to occur, all of that information had to be known in its completeness and totality, and known some two thousand years ago.<sup>1</sup>

And so the One who knows us the best and loves us the most, the LORD God Almighty, knew exactly what to do to resurrect God the Son who had been in existence with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit from the very beginning, before that first word of creation, “Let there be light.”

Now Mary and several of the disciples had seen the empty tomb. On the evening of that important day, the disciples huddled in the Upper Room where they had last been with Jesus and locked the doors for fear of being found and killed for their beliefs.

As anxiety increases around the fear of opening up our State too soon, the religious have a significant contribution to make. Often, fear overcomes us because of the unknown. We want control and a certainty before we move into the unknown. But can we ever really have complete certainty? In this regard, Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and the emerita Butman

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<sup>1</sup>Taken from Thomas A. Miller, MD, *Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?* (Crossway, 2013), 133-136.

Professor of Religion at Piedmont College, writes, “When a student asks our host what it is like to be Muslim in the United States today, he pauses...’Let us say that when I travel overseas, I always leave several hours early for the airport, so that when I am detained I will not miss my flight.’ He does not say ‘if’ he is detained. He says ‘when.’”<sup>2</sup> Might your fear of the unknown cause a response that is irrational and not Christian?

The texts in Acts 2:14a, 22-32 and John 20:19-31 declare that Christian beliefs are at your disposal to overcome fear.

In Acts 2:14, 22-32, we hear the first public sermon about the resurrection. Peter’s sermon proclaims that Jesus is alive. His audience has knowledge of the great works Jesus had done, but they have no reference to the resurrection. But they do have the testimony of the disciples about Jesus being alive. Acts 2:32 reads, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.” Peter does not point to himself or any of the other disciples, but to God whose word guarantees the truth and reality of the resurrection. This sermon is preached at the launching of the Church, the Christian movement, following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We will celebrate Pentecost in seven weeks.

In John 20:19-31, we learn that fear is overcome when faith leads to understanding. The 4<sup>th</sup> century Church Father Augustine asserted the maxim that faith leads to understanding. That faith (belief) leads to understanding (experience) is demonstrated in John 20:19-31. The setting was evening on the day of the resurrection. The fear of being arrested and suffering the same fate as Jesus consumed the disciples. Would their beliefs sustain them when others confronted them about their relationship with Jesus? And Jesus appeared in the Upper room. Jesus said, “Peace be with you!” It was the risen Jesus, the Jesus with nail holes in his hands and feet. The Greek word for peace, εἰρήνη, denotes God providing. The peace Jesus provides overcomes fear. The disciples were comforted. Their beliefs gave them understanding. Belief makes no difference

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<sup>2</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy* (New York, New York: HarperOne, 2019), 135.

until one uses it in real life situations. Remember, doubt does not stand against faith Resolved doubt leads to faith, which produces understanding.<sup>3</sup>

The resurrected Jesus matters today. As followers of Jesus Christ, should not our Christian beliefs provide some modicum of peace amid life's fears? Reflect upon basic Christian beliefs such as God being Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life; that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; and that God is sovereign and nothing happens in life by accident, but with purpose. For example, how could your Christian beliefs overcome your fears related to immigration, the homeless, people different than yourself and COVID-19?

Jesus, because of his resurrection and by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, makes a real difference in real people, who live in a real world, who have real fears. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor, the author of *Holy Envy*, writes,

Where can I get photos to back up my claim that most people of every faith wish to live in peace? What are my sources for believing that I have nothing to fear from the vast majority of people who do not share my faith? My only hope—the small hope embedded in this book—is that the students in Religion 101 will be able to maintain possession of their own imaginations, declining to surrender them to people who know nothing about their life, their school, their faith, or their friends of many faiths.<sup>4</sup>

The fears we have brought on by real life, and now particularly the Coronavirus (COVID-19), are only addressed when we exercise what we believe to be true as Christians to inform the decisions we make in order to embrace the unknown with confidence. Jesus calls each one of us by name, telling us not to be afraid, but to have peace. God has a warm relationship with you. God loves you and wants you to love others with that same empathetic, listening, caring, loving and compassionate warmth.

Until your Christian beliefs inform your daily thoughts, words and deeds, you're really not living dynamically in the public square discussion of the fears you and others have. Let's seek

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<sup>3</sup>In the two paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Ian A. McFarland, Karoline M. Lewis, Margaret P. Aymer and Ruben Rosario Rodriguez in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 209-211, 211-212, 220-222 and 222-224.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 137.

a better way to live together, overcoming fear, by remembering, telling and living the way of Jesus. Listen to Jesus. Experience Jesus. Show others Jesus. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 19 April 2020  
by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in his Study at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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