

PEACE BE WITH YOU

John 20:19-31

A man tells of visiting a college which had for its students' protection, security call boxes every few hundred feet. If you were wandering around the campus at night and felt uneasy about somebody following you, you could hit the button on that call box and have a security officer come investigate immediately.

On one of these phones hung a sign that said, "Out of Order."

Underneath the "Out of Order" sign someone had scrawled, "Keep Running!" (1)

To me that is a metaphor of how many people live their lives today--they can't find any security or real peace, so they just keep running.

It was the evening of the first Easter Sunday. Earlier that morning Peter and John had been to the tomb. They had discovered it was empty. They saw the strips of linen as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. It was a puzzling mystery. They knew something important had happened but they were not sure what. So they returned to the house where they were staying.

Mary, however, stayed behind. And she had a somewhat mystical experience. Weeping, she bent over once more to look into the tomb and she saw what appeared to be two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. Then immediately afterward she had an encounter with a stranger that in her grief she mistook for the gardener. Then he called her name and she discovered it wasn't the gardener at all. It was the Master risen from the grave. She ran back to tell Peter and John and the other disciples about her experience.

That evening the disciples were still processing all this. John tells us they were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders. That's interesting. We make a big deal about Easter Sunday morning, but Easter Sunday evening, the disciples were still cowering in fear. Obviously some questions still remained.

So the tomb was empty, but what did that prove? Maybe somebody did steal his body. O.K., Mary had her mystical experience in the garden. But, after all she was a woman. You know how emotional they can be. Maybe she just imagined this experience. After all, she loved him so much. Everything she was she owed to him.

So, there they were, these followers of Jesus, behind those locked doors, speaking in whispers, confused, frightened, like sheep without a shepherd. Then, says our lesson for today, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side." Then John adds these words, "The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."

This, as broadcaster Paul Harvey used to say, is the rest of the story. Jesus stood in the midst of them. He spoke to them: “Peace be with you!” Then he showed them his hands and side. There was no longer any doubt. This was their Master, risen from the grave. And they were overjoyed.

If the Gospel had concluded on Easter Sunday morning with the empty tomb and the appearance of the stranger to Mary, there might be some question about the validity of the resurrection. It is Easter Sunday evening that clinches the deal. It is the joy that the disciples experienced behind those locked doors--doors bolted with fear and doubt and misgivings--it is that joy that quiets our doubts, our fears, our misgivings. There was no question. He is alive, just as he said.

Let’s deal with this beautiful story this morning and apply this experience to our lives. **Let’s begin with those locked doors.** Why were they locked? Out of fear, of course. Jesus had been put to death by his enemies. Would they now turn their hatred toward his followers? It was a reasonable question.

I read a humorous story this week about a couple who were vacationing in Yosemite Park. The wife expressed her concern about camping because of bears and said she would feel more comfortable in a motel. The husband said that he’d like to camp, but, to calm her concerns, they’d talk to the park ranger to see what the likelihood of a bear encounter would be.

The ranger told them, “Well, we haven’t seen any grizzlies in this area so far this year, or black bears, for that matter.”

The wife shrieked, “There are two types of bears out here? How can you tell the difference? Which one is more dangerous?”

The ranger replied, “Well, that’s easy, see, if the bear chases you up the tree and it comes up after you, it’s a black bear. If it shakes the tree until you fall out, it’s a grizzly.”

The wife decided that the motel room would work quite nicely. (2)

I suspect that many of you think her reaction was quite reasonable. Even though bear attacks don’t happen very often, just the thought is quite scary. She might miss some of the thrill of being closer to nature, but we can understand her reaction.

Fear is quite debilitating. Fear keeps us from living our lives openly and joyfully. It keeps us running when our real need is to rest and relax.

Some of you may remember the name W. Edwards Deming. Back when the Total Quality Movement was the rage in business, Deming was its key guru. He’s often called “the father of total quality management.” Deming said that one of his fourteen keys to building a high-performance organization was to “drive out fear.” In the absence of fear, people tend to perform and produce at a higher level. (2)

That’s interesting, don’t you think? In the absence of fear, people perform better.

We have noted before how often biblical characters are told, “Don’t be afraid.”

In Luke’s telling of this same story, the disciples are terrified when Jesus suddenly appears in their midst. They think he is a ghost (Luke 24:36-39). No wonder he has to say to them, “Peace be with you!” That’s what peace is, the absence of fear, or at least it is fear under control. As long as we are in this world there will be things to fear. That’s part of the human condition. But Christ helps us keep our fears under control. Christ helps us delineate reasonable fears from unreasonable fears. It is fear that causes us to resent other people--that causes us to lash out in anger and envy. If we could keep our fears under control we would live more Christ-like lives.

The disciples were behind locked doors out of fear from Jesus’ enemies. Jesus appears in the midst of them and says, “Peace be with you!”

“Peace be with you.” That was a common greeting and probably one he had spoken to them many times. But in this situation it was more than a greeting. It was a message that they needed to hear.

Jesus means for his followers to have peace. That’s the first thing we need to see. As the popular preacher Adam Hamilton has said, “The resurrected Jesus didn’t promise wealth or health or prosperity or power; what he promised was peace.” (3)

I confess to you that I have known some Christians who have anything but peace.

It is said that during World War II, in the cinemas of Cardiff a notice would sometimes appear on the screen interrupting the films: “An air raid has sounded. Be British. Don’t panic.”

That’s great, isn’t it? So very British. “Be British. Don’t panic.” A similar admonition ought to characterize followers of Jesus: “Be Christian. Don’t panic.”

How do we find peace of mind? Some of you may be familiar with a study Duke University did on this very subject years ago. They listed eight keys to emotional and mental stability. I find them quite helpful:

The first key is, “Get rid of suspicion and resentment.” Nursing a grudge is a major factor in unhappiness.

The second is, “Don’t live in the past.” An unwholesome preoccupation with old mistakes and failures leads to depression.

The third key is, “Don’t waste time and energy fighting conditions you cannot change.” Cooperate with life, instead of trying to run away from it.

The fourth is, “Force yourself to stay involved with the living world.” Resist the temptation to withdraw and become reclusive during periods of emotional stress.

The fifth is, “Refuse to indulge in self-pity when life hands you a raw deal.” Accept the fact that nobody gets through life without some sorrow and misfortune.

The sixth is, “Cultivate the old-fashioned virtues--love, humor, compassion and loyalty.”

Number seven is, “Do not expect too much of yourself.” When there is too wide a gap between self-expectation and your ability to meet the goals you have set, feelings of inadequacy are inevitable.

And finally, number eight is “Find something bigger than yourself to believe in.” Self-centered egotistical people score lowest in any test for measuring happiness. (4)

Peace within would seem to be a no-brainer for followers of Jesus. “Find something bigger than yourself to believe in.” That is the ultimate key to peace of mind.

On December 26, 1944, Japanese Intelligence Officer Hiroo Onoda, arrived on Lubang Island in the Philippines. Onoda’s orders were simple. He and his men were to stop the enemy from securing the island. But before this Japanese military unit could destroy the airstrip and blow up the pier, American forces captured Lubang Island. Onoda and three other Japanese soldiers fled to the hills and hid.

They were still hiding a year later. Onoda discovered a leaflet that read, “The war ended on August 15. Come down from the mountains!” Onoda refused. His orders were clear. Under no circumstances was he to surrender.

Unable to reach his superiors, Onoda and his men burrowed deeper into the hills. Five years later, in 1949, one of the men surrendered to Filipino forces. A few years after that, an aircraft dropped letters and pictures from Onoda’s family, urging him to come down. Still he refused. In 1954 members of a search party accidentally killed one of Onoda’s men. Twenty years later local police mistakenly shot the last of his comrades. Now only Onoda remained, alone and forgotten, fighting a war he’d already lost . . .

On March 9, 1974, thirty years after he first went into hiding, Onoda emerged from the jungle. He surrendered his uniform, sword, rifle, hand grenades, and 500 rounds of ammunition. He’d already surrendered thirty years of his life to isolation and fear. (5) What a tragic waste. But so it is with all who live as slaves to fear. Jesus means for his followers to have peace.

This brings us to the second thing we need to see: our greatest need is peace.

A number of years ago a major American magazine published the results of a most fascinating survey. The editors had asked 16 prominent Americans what they did in order to find peace of mind in the midst of our stressful world. The responses were quite revealing.

Noted author James Michener reported that he found peace of mind by walking his two dogs along deserted country roads, old streams and fields that had not been plowed for half a century.

Barry Goldwater, whom some of you will remember as a former Republican candidate for President, said that he found peace of mind in his hobbies--boating, photography and flying. He especially found peace of mind by taking reflective walks in

the Grand Canyon.

Walter Cronkite, the former CBS anchorman, said he preferred solitude, usually by “going to sea in a small boat.”

And the late Sammy Davis, Jr., listed looking for the best in others as a way to find peace of mind. (6)

Toward the end of World War II, Harry S. Truman, then President, was asked how he was able to keep his cool under the pressures of his office. He said that he had a “foxhole” in his mind and that just as, in combat, the infantryman could scramble into his foxhole to take cover, he relied on a “mental foxhole” in times of stress.

The philosopher Marcus Aurelius shared this conviction. He believed devoutly that a human being needed the capacity to retreat within himself to acquire peace of mind and inner renewal. (7)

How do you find peace of mind? If you are smart, you will find peace in the presence of the risen Christ. That is the only place where true peace is available.

Barry Kolp tells about a trip to an amusement park he and his wife took with their son Matthew when Matthew was quite small. After riding several kiddie rides, Matthew wanted to try the rocket ride which was quite scary. Sitting in the seat, Barry tucked Matthew safely between his knees, and off they went.

As the rocket twirled through the sky, Matthew whimpered a little and said, “Hold me, Daddy.” Once he leaned against his father’s arms, he relaxed--and even wanted to ride the rocket ride again.

After that experience, says Barry, whenever he himself faced something new and frightening in his life, he found himself whispering to his Heavenly Father, “Please hold me,” just as his son had asked his Dad to hold him. Barry reports that as soon as he became aware of God’s presence, he could relax--and even begin to enjoy himself. (8)

That is the true secret of peace within. Isn’t it time you quit running? Isn’t it time you nestled yourself in the arms of your Heavenly Father? Jesus stood in the midst of his disciples and said, “Peace be with you!” Jesus wants his followers to have peace. Peace is our greatest need. Peace comes when we lean on the arms of our Heavenly Father. Jesus says to each of us this day: “Peace be with you!”

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 4. *Final Words: From the Cross* (Kindle edition).
 5. <http://cccenterhope.blogspot.com/2012/12/peace-of-mind.html>.
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8. Maxwell Maltz, *Psycho-Cybernetic Principles for Creative Living* (New York: Pocket Books, 1974), p. 204.