

WELCOME 24th May 2020 – 7 Easter '20 A

Luke 24:1-9 & 1 Peter 4:12-14 & 5:6-11

Good morning! Welcome back to the On-line well of Living Water as our Easter season celebration continues! It's great we can be together in this way...in this time when we can't be together. I'm glad you're here & pray this becomes a place you feel ok & a part of all that's going on AND when we **ARE** back together...you'll pop in & hang out with us in person. Please check our website for our weekly Zoom Bible Study catch-ups. Those are a nice way to stay in touch & experience God's Word together!

*As we move into this week...*As a parent...I've chased away "gargantuan" spiders, left nightlights burning, & addressed a fair number of bad dreams. As a pastor...I've been witness to crumbling marriages, strained/broken relationships with children, jobs about to be lost, & addictions to be addressed. In my own life I've wondered how we would pay a bill, what a Dr's report would show, & whether a congregation was beyond my capacity to lead...

We all know what fear feels like...In whatever shape it arrives today...we know it when it comes.

Jesus was clear, *"The thief comes only to steal kill & destroy..."* The thief's chief weapon: fear, will steal your peace, kill your joy, & destroy your trust in him. *"But I came,"* Jesus said, *"that you might have life & have it abundantly."* – Jn 10:10 The Bible reminds us, *"Perfect love (of the kind the Father demonstrates toward us in Jesus Christ) casts out fear,"* 1 Jn 4:18 and *"...the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil."* 1 Jn 3:8

With those convictions in mind...Peter encourages us:

"Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are."

Stand firm against the devil...be strong in your faith. The sure defense against the insidious work of the enemy & his oppressing fear...THE BOLDNESS OF FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

Boldness is acting, by the power of the Holy Spirit, on the unshakable conviction that in Christ every enemy ultimately is powerless against his resurrection & his power in you. Boldness is trusting that in this circumstance, God's hand still holds you & his love still sustains you. Boldness is living into the promise of the Father that nothing can separate you from his love & that the future he intends is brighter than any current darkness.

In a world that is harsh at the best of times, among folks who will often turn their worst against your best, Jesus calls us to **MOVE TOGETHER: IN BOLDNESS** living from his unlimited power in us now - until the day we share in the fullness of his victory & his eternal glory.

We'll explore & experience that together today... Let's pray...and then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Holy and gracious saving Father, let this day be a worthy celebration of Christ's resurrection and the living hope into which you have brought us. In the light streaming from the empty tomb, move our hearts to be free from worry, unchained from fear, and released from distraction. Open our minds to your Spirit that we may love you more deeply, obey you more fervently and worship you more fully...Through Jesus, our living brother, Saviour and friend we pray...Amen

FAITH CHAT:

1. Describe a time when you felt "alone" in a struggle. What was that like?
2. In what ways is "fear" a destructive force? How does faith stand against it?
3. What are some ways you see the devil at work in this world?

BIBLES

7 EASTER '20 A – MOVE TOGETHER: IN BOLDNESS

The "new normal." You've probably heard/read that buzz-phrase more than once over the last few weeks. It's been coined to suggest that when we emerge from these months of Wuhan Virus lock-down; life will be forever changed... irreparably different. But have things really changed? From what I can tell, the same thing keeping folks in bondage, paralysis, & despair right now...that has robbed them of courage or hope & causes their worldview to shrink & is interfering in lives across the globe has been around forever. You've experienced it...I've felt it...It's FEAR...

Basil King, in his book *The Conquest of Fear*, contends that fear causes more misery than sin & sickness combined. He writes, "We are not sick all the time. We do not sin all the time. But most people are afraid of something or somebody all the time." And in our current circumstances...We've heard the expert press briefings that when I'm out in public I need to act as if I have a contagious virus or that you have a contagious virus...I need to be afraid of infecting you or of you infecting me. Fear is supposed to be our new normal...Fear just kinda hangs around & ought to direct our actions...Fear & it's siblings worry anxiety apprehension...are supposed to be our new operating standard from now on...but virus or not fear is no new thing... **BIBLES**

Remember the people to whom Peter originally wrote had every reason to be afraid. Their lives were at risk every time they worshipped together or refused to worship the Roman gods or pay honour to Caesar. They were viewed as a threat to the good order of the Roman world. Many paid with their lives. So Peter writes to strengthen & fortify their faith... deepen their reliance on Jesus & reinforce the truth in which they have been trained so that as they interact with their not-yet-Xn neighbours the light of Christ & the boldness of their faith gives witness to the living hope they carry with them in Jesus raised from the dead.

As we've been reading through Peter's 1st letter to the church scattered by persecution across Asia Minor, we discover that all who trust in Christ for their ultimate security are *already part of a normal* different the world around us. It's not a *new normal/world's normal*. It's an *ETERNAL NORMAL*...it's the norm (standard mindset-worldview-heartfelt approach to life) for those whose hearts are fixed on the eternal hope of Jesus Christ crucified/risen/ruling over all things in his powerful grace. It's the norm for those who see in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of the Father's sovereign plan from before the universe was created to have all things cradled in his love – delighting in his presence & responsive to his will. Peter is clear: every word every deed every day is our opportunity to live that *ETERNAL NORMAL* for the world to see & for some to be so captivated by our living witness to Jesus Christ that they too are drawn by the Spirit into that *ETERNAL NORMAL* of life in the Father's presence...saved by his grace & delighting in his love.

And now...Peter assures us...because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave...the amazing work of his grace will be accomplished in & through us. Suffering will not stop his transforming work. Circumstances don't limit his ability to redeem/restore. In spite of life's trials/troubles/tribulation, His hand holds you, his love sustains you, his mercy protects you, his compassion cares for you & his power is in you. In all things, Peter says, the Father equips you for a life of boldness in faith in the face of what the world says you should fear...

I mentioned last week the simple directive "*Do not be afraid*" is the most repeated command in the Bible (70x) Peter also directs followers of Jesus away from fear in a way that seems odd at first...look at 4:12 - "*Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening.*" Don't be surprised... Whether you are facing an attack as one who wears the name of Jesus boldly & publicly or you're in the Emergency Room when you ought to be asleep in your own bed; or picking up the pieces after fire/flood/illness... *Never Forget* in a world broken & twisted by sin & death: pain - tragedy - distress – tears are part & parcel of everyday living. You will always have something to be afraid of if you give in to fear. Don't be surprised – Heartbroken? Yes. Grief-stricken? Absolutely. Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb for good reason...Suffering & death – heartache & loss were not God's intention & still are not what he desires for those whom he loves. But look at what Peter says next...

Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. Over & over again Peter reminds us that on the cross of Jesus Christ, God absorbs the full weight of human sinfulness & the chaos sin leaves in its wake. In the suffering/death/resurrection of Jesus we glimpse the path to our ultimate healing & the end of all suffering & pain. Through his death we are given life.

The 1st question today...Describe a time when you felt "alone" in a struggle. What was that like? Peter reassures us that as followers of Jesus we are *NEVER* alone...When we suffer, the pain is great, tears won't stop, for whatever reason what we experience in that moment, Jesus has already felt to the very depths of human existence. The cross is the clear sign that God loves you & sent his one & only Son to share your suffering/death so that *IN HIM* you can find life beyond the reach of pain/agony/tears/death. The writer of *Heb 4:15-16: This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses for he faced all the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will*

receive his mercy, & find grace to help us when we need it most.” – “Since he himself has gone through suffering & testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested.” – 2:18 Don’t be surprised when sin/death/evil lash out in this world, but don’t be afraid: *YOU ARE NEVER ALONE*. In fact...if you look back to the OT...as God brought his people out of slavery in Egypt & led them toward the land he promised their ancestors... 1st God says: *I will walk among you; I will be your God, & you will be my people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt so you would no longer be their slaves. I broke the yoke of slavery from your neck so you can walk with your heads held high.* – Lev 26:12-13 Then later: *Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord will personally go ahead of you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor abandon you.*” – Dt 31:8

Remember fear is always focused on me/self. (scarcity – lack – unfulfilled desire - smallness *little boat big sea*) Faith is fixed on the expansive eternal sovereignty of God who in Christ crucified/risen has committed to us his presence & power & love. God’s horizon is infinite & eternal. The Father will never run out of blessing – provision – care. *Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?* – Rom 8:32 The sure defense against the insidious work of the enemy & his oppressing fear...THE BOLDNESS OF FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST. Our theme verse today:

“Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, & be strong in your faith. Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are.” – 1 Pt 5:8-9

Peter does not want us to grow complacent, arrogant or cocky...the enemy is always prepared to trick trap or trip us up. There is always a bid being made for our souls trying to get us to shift our allegiance away from the sure living hope we have in Jesus. But that persistent work of the enemy should not be occasion for fear. Fear always shows us obstacles & threats while bold faith obeys God one step at a time. I know I have shared often that 1 of my favourite accounts in the Bible is in the book of Daniel: the 3 guys/fiery furnace. King Nebuchadnezzar builds a giant statue & commands all his subjects to worship it. Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego refuse. The king threatens death: *“Now I am going to give you one more chance. If you bow down & worship the statue when you hear the music, everything will be all right. But if you don’t, you will at once be thrown into a flaming furnace. No god can save you from me.”* The three men replied, *“Your Majesty, we don’t need to defend ourselves. The God we worship can save us from you & your flaming furnace. But even if he doesn’t, we still won’t worship your gods & the statue you have set up.”* – Dan 3:15-18 Can you hear that? *“Even if he doesn’t...”* They don’t know what God’s next step will be but they know theirs. Their next step is faithfulness to God & his will & his way in this world – their next step is an act of bold faith not fear.

The trust, hope, & purpose to which God calls us is unbreakably bound to God’s eternal desire to redeem & recreate all Creation, not to our life circumstances – the historical conditions of this life. When we claim our identity as a child of God, we see the world differently When we see the world differently we live differently. We begin to claim God’s purpose as our own. We begin to claim God’s intended future for this world as our desired future. The future hope & destiny God has given us is not to be filled with fear, but overflowing with bold faith, living hope, resilient joy, & irresistible passionate love. Our destiny is not to behave as if our challenges will determine the future, but to live knowing the future has already been determined in the resurrection of Jesus so we can enjoy the fruits of that future right here & right now. As Christians, we should view our present troubles against the backdrop of the future. *Take heart, Jesus has overcome the world.*

The other week in an online discussion of pastors from across Australia...we were asked what we prayed for as our congregations emerge from this Wuhan virus driven lockdown. My answer & my fervent prayer is that when we are able to gather as a whole community of Christ-followers we imitate Paul before his journey to Rome where he will die for the name of Jesus. In Acts 20, Paul is in Ephesus one last time & the church there begs him not to go to Jerusalem because trouble & danger wait for him there. On the dock before he boards a ship bound for Jerusalem where he will be arrested & eventually sent to Rome to die he says this:

Acts 20:18-24

“You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now I have done the Lord’s work humbly & with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of (our enemies). I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. I have had one message...the necessity of repenting from sin & turning to God, of having faith in our Lord Jesus. Now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don’t know what awaits me, except the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail & suffering lie ahead. But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.”

My prayer for Living Water & for the whole church in this city is that we come out of this season boldly proclaiming the *ETERNAL NORMAL* of the eternal hope of Jesus Christ crucified/risen/ruling over all things in his powerful grace.

My prayer is that we don’t come back timidly or fearfully wondering if that person’s got something that will kill us but that we embrace each other in bold faith, living hope, resilient joy, & irresistible passionate love & declare that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Father’s sovereign plan from before the universe was created to have all things cradled in his love – delighting in his presence & responsive to his will.

My prayer is that we use every word every deed every day as our opportunity to live that *ETERNAL NORMAL* for the world to see & for some to be so captivated by our living witness to Jesus Christ that they too are drawn by the Spirit into that *ETERNAL NORMAL* of life in the Father's presence...saved by his grace & delighting in his love. For is we fail in that day we fail Paul's normal:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. – 2 Tim 1:7

But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.” – Acts 20:24

Boldness is acting, by the power of the Holy Spirit, on the unshakable conviction that in Christ every enemy ultimately is powerless against his resurrection & his power in you. Boldness is trusting that in this circumstance, God's hand still holds you & his love still sustains you. Boldness is living into the promise of the Father that nothing can separate you from his love & that the future he intends is brighter than any current darkness.

In a world that is harsh at the best of times, among folks who will often turn their worst against your best, Jesus calls us to **MOVE TOGETHER: IN BOLDNESS** living from his unlimited power in us now - until the day we share in the fullness of his victory & his eternal glory.

Let's pray with that in mind...

Lord Jesus you've done all that needs doing so we could be part of your family now & forever & delight in your love & power & presence all the days of our lives. You know our greatest fears...right now we give those to you...they're yours...We don't want them any longer. Replace those fears with faith...with the confidence & assurance only you & your mighty love can give. Fill our hearts with the boldness to share with someone else what you are doing in this world & what you are doing in us...

Living Lord Jesus, you appeared to your disciples in their hour of fear & gave your Spirit to encourage their anxious hearts. Come to us by that same Spirit & open our hearts so we can boldly live our hope in you in our world. Equip us to bring peace to those trapped in sorrow or distress and courage to those shackled by worry & alarm. Strengthen our faith & intensify our witness so that we offer to others your promise of abundant life, unceasing joy & unending love...

Remember us in your kingdom & teach us to pray...