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## *Encounters: The Fearful* John 20:19-23

For five weeks we are looking at John's stories about various encounters with the resurrected Jesus. Last week's encounter was with "the Tearful" Mary Magdalene as she struggled with loss. That topic opened the flood gates for us. It was a powerful morning and I think we went to a deeper place as a church. This morning we move from the "Tearful" to the "Fearful." [Read John 20:19-23]

*"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews..."* This is a story about Jesus' encounter with his fearful disciples. So I'd like to share my most terrifying moment. I was having a nightmare. I dreamt I was tied down and that someone was strangling me. I convinced myself to go back to sleep. Same nightmare. Again, I slept. But the third time I realized it wasn't a nightmare. I really was tied down. I really was choking. I was tied to a bed in an ICU, and I was choking on an intubation tube and a nurse was suctioning my throat saying, "It's okay, Mark. You're going to be all right, buddy."

That occurred ten years ago this August 14. I fell on my head while ice skating at Sun Valley, Idaho. I experienced severe brain swell and was airlifted to Boise. Doctors described my condition as "grave." Of course, the whole day was terrifying for my family. At one point Rachel asked, "Who's going to take over Chapel Hill if Daddy dies?" "Pastor Stuart," Cooper said. I was oblivious to my family's terror, because I was in a drug-induced coma. But when I woke up to discover myself bound and choking, that I recall as the most fearful moment of my life.

Everyone here understands fear. Again I asked you to share your stories with me. Again, I got pages and pages in response. Here are some of your terrifying moments:

"...when I was 21 and my 4 yr. old was having unexplainable seizures."..."When my 5 month old son was diagnosed with congenital heart disease, and I had to hand him over for open heart surgery. He was so sick they didn't even close his chest. They covered it with gauze and tape and wrote "Open Chest" across his little body." "Watching the World Trade Center fall." "When my husband and I found out he had cancer..."

"I am afraid right now because my marriage is falling apart."...I'm afraid "of losing my children to suicide. One has attempted suicide twice; my 21 year old also made an unsuccessful suicide attempt." "Ten years ago. Major depressive episode. Wife, toddler and newborn relying on me. Business failing. No sleep for days. No appetite. Felt like falling into an abyss of insanity."...

"One evening, about a year ago, my husband was speaking to me when his sentence became gibberish. He was having a stroke." "...when my angry, drunk, husband wrapped his large hands around my neck..." "Losing my 3 year old daughter for 23 minutes in an amusement park... I ran around the park the searching, grabbing people and shaking them, screaming, begging for help..."

"Two Sundays ago... we came home after lunch and surprised two men attempting to break into our home by shattering the glass front door... they pointed a gun at us." "Hearing the doctor say, "I am so sorry, but your son has a large brain tumor."

*"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews..."* Fear is a real, visceral part of our human experience, isn't it? The Bible is aware of this. Do you know what the most oft-repeated command is in scripture? Do not be afraid! More than any other command... more than "Obey me" or "Follow me" or "Love me." "Do not be afraid!" It was a particular favorite opening line of angels. Of course, they were always wasting their breath. Every time the people were afraid!

Fear is not necessarily a bad thing. A police officer wrote, "My most frightening moment was the time I showed up at a call and was ambushed by a sniper." He dove into a rose garden to save her life. Was fear appropriate? Of course. Often, it is.

The question is what does fear do in us? It can mobilize. Like the 12 year old girl who was kidnapped on a family vacation and forced into the man's room. She got loose and ran. She cried out to Jesus, and her dad heard her and rescued her from the man who was still chasing her. This girl's fear mobilized her, and it saved her.

But fear can also paralyze, can't it? Like the woman who was raped in her own home and spent 12 years living in fear... boarding herself in, drinking and taking pills to sleep. 12 years! "Night after night after night I lived with this horrible fear that the rapist would return." Or like the disciples who were hiding in terror that first Easter night. Paralyzed.

Even though Peter and John had seen the empty tomb—even though Mary Magdalene reported that she had seen the Lord alive—they were still terrified. And it is in that terrified state that they encounter the risen Christ. So how did Jesus

help his terrified, petrified disciples face their fears? Let's walk quickly through it together.

<sup>19</sup>*On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them...*" We are led to believe that Jesus miraculously appeared despite the locked doors. And notice where he appeared. He *"came and stood among them."* Not a good translation. It really says, "He came and stood right in the middle of them." In their moment of fear, Jesus was right there smack dab in the middle of their lives.

*"Peace be with you!"* Shalom a lechem. Common Jewish greeting. You know this would have been a perfect opportunity for Jesus to say, "Do not be afraid!" As I said, it was the most frequent command in the Bible. And they were afraid. But Jesus comes, stands among them and he does not command them what not to do. In fact, he doesn't command anything. He just gives. He offers a blessing of peace. A benediction! In other words, Jesus' approach to fear is not to insist that his disciples cowboy up, get tough and be men about it. He speaks a new reality of His peace into their lives.

Are you familiar with the word "displacement?" It is used in the sciences to describe the expulsion of something with something else. It is one thing to say, "Get rid of that fear you have!" But Jesus understood that the best way to get rid of one thing is to displace it with something better. He found his frightened friends, stepped into the middle of them, and displaced their terror with shalom!

<sup>20</sup> *"After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."* Next, Jesus gave them a reason to be at peace. He proved that it really was he! Alive! He met them right there—right in the middle of their fear—he pronounced peace upon them, and then he reminded them with his scars of the many reasons they could trust that his peace-blessing had some teeth to it!

<sup>21</sup> *"Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."* Once more, Jesus pronounces shalom upon them then does something remarkable. He commissions them! He tells them that he is sending them into the world with his message. Now think about this... only moments earlier, they were shivering in fear behind locked doors. The last thing they wanted to do was go public about Jesus. Now, in these brief moments following his appearance, Jesus commissions them to go out into the very world from which they have been hiding. How is that possible?!

It is here that we come to one of the most fascinating verses in John's gospel:

<sup>22</sup> *"And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* Standing in their midst, He pronounces shalom upon them. He spins slowly, showing them his wounds. And then, he does this... breathes on them! [Breathe]

Do you remember how often in John's gospel Jesus is the fulfillment of an Old Testament image? And how many times Jesus, the I AM, claims to be God. He's doing it again! Genesis 2:7 describes the creation of man: The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

The word for "breath" in Hebrew is "ruach." Ruach also means Spirit! When God created man, he breathed his Holy Spirit into Adam to enliven him. Now Jesus does it again. [Breathe] Breathes His Holy Spirit into his disciples to enliven, encourage, empower them. This isn't Pentecost. That would come later. But it's a sneak peek, a taste of what they would experience after Jesus was gone. But in this moment, it is the very real, very life-giving gift of Jesus' very Spirit.

So, Jesus is sending the disciples, empowered by his Spirit, with the authority to forgive sin. At its heart, that is the message of the cross. Jesus died to save sinners. His disciples were to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus and invite people to respond to His salvation. Upon those who would, they could pronounce "Forgiven" in the name of Jesus. Upon those who would not, they would pronounce "Unforgiven."

And remarkably, the disciples obeyed. Empowered by the Spirit, they went forth to proclaim salvation to the world. Were they still afraid? Probably. But somehow, after their encounter with the risen Christ they went from paralyzed to mobilized...to accomplish the mission Jesus had given them. Even with fear.

That's great for them, but what about us? What about our fear? I don't want to pretend it is simple. I have an issue I have been living with for more than five years that causes me fear, and even this week I had my paralyzing moments. But as I have tried to remember and live out the things I'm going to share with you, I have found increasing peace and courage to press on... even in my fear.

**First, invite Jesus right into the middle of your fear.** [Fingers point down] One of the core truths of the incarnation is this: God wants to enter into the midst of our terror, whatever it is. So invite Him in! And I'm not just talking about throwing up a desperate prayer. Nearly everyone prays when they are frightened. That what foxhole conversions are all about. But there is a difference between grasping desperately for some sort of spiritual comfort—somewhere out there—and inviting Jesus to come and set up shop smack dab in the middle of that which terrifies you most. Some people play Jesus like a fish on the end of a long line. You reel him in when you need him, and then release the drag when you think you've got it back under control. Is that you? If so, you will never know the peace and power of the person who is living an insistently Christocentric life. Invite Jesus now right into the middle of your fear, not as a desperate afterthought.

**Ask Jesus to remind you how trustworthy He is.** [Open hands, held low] Jesus showed his circle of friends the death-wounds over which he triumphed! His

nail punched hands, his spear-pierced side—these were proof and reminder of the trustworthiness of His power. If you are afraid, ask the Lord to bring to your remembrance all the ways that Christ has showed his power to you in the past. All the ways he has been faithful to you. And if you have trouble remembering, ask a Christian friend to remember with you. Do it in your LifeGroup. If you take the time to count your blessings—recall your deliverance, remember your healings, rehearse the faithful power of God in your life—it will help to displace the lurking and anonymous fear that can steal your peace.

Another way is to memorize scripture. Have you ever memorized a passage of scripture? Right now, my LifeGroup is memorizing Romans 5:1-8. Part of it says, *“We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; character, hope; and hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.”* When you are afraid—when you run out of words to pray—pray back God’s own Word to him; remind him, and remind yourself, of his trustworthy promises!

**Breathe in deeply the gift of Jesus’ Spirit.** [Open hands, held up] Has anyone ever told you, when you were frightened, “Take a deep breath?” It helps, doesn’t it? But I wonder if this passage doesn’t encourage us to think more spiritually about such an act? Jesus breathed His Spirit toward his disciples. How do you think they were to receive it? Inhale! Just as Adam inhaled that first breath of God. For centuries, Christians have practiced breathing prayer as a way to relive this moment and to remind us of the displacing power of God’s Holy Spirit. When you are fearful, try this: Palms up, breathe deeply and say, “Fill me, Holy Spirit. I Receive you, Holy Spirit! I welcome you, Holy Spirit!” Remember, there is a displacing power that comes with this. When we invite the Holy Spirit to fill us anew He chases out fear, accusations, doubts, and anxiety—all the corrosive stuff that the Devil would prefer remain inside of us!

**Finally, live in courageous obedience.** [Pointing fingers out] Were the disciples comforted when they were done with that meeting? Yes. Was it the last time they would be frightened? No! And with good reason. Ultimately, all of them except for John died a martyr’s death. James, Mathias, and Bartholomew were beheaded. Philip, Simon, Andrew and Peter were crucified; the other James was thrown from the wall of Temple, survived and then clubbed to death; Thomas and Matthew were speared; Jude was shot with arrows and Thaddeus, stoned to death.

So it’s not like their fears were unfounded, but they had gone from paralyzed to mobilized. And that is what we are after, isn’t it? We don’t expect never to be afraid again. There will be a late night call, a bad doctor’s report, an uncovered secret that will be fearsome. And those moments will not end until we stand before the Lord in heaven.

Until then, though, Christ has placed upon us an incredible calling. He has sent us into the world like the Father sent him. Think about what that means if you consider yourself a disciple of Jesus. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son—that's how the Father sent Jesus... "For God so loved the world, that he gave Mike and Deb and Sally and Theresa." Really? Yes! As the Father sent Jesus, now he sends us! We are his instruments of salvation... of peace, of hope, of shalom. We... you and I!

Last week we got a call from a daughter whose mom was in her last hours and was terrified of death. What would it feel like? Where would she go? Just terrified. So, two of our wonderful visitation team—Nanci and Deb—immediately went to the hospital to minister to her. They read scripture, held hands, prayed. They spoke to her of the assurance of God's love, forgiveness and eternal life. And there was a dramatic change in this woman. Through the love of these visiting angels, fear was cast out. After two hours, they left. And 45 minutes later, she was gone. Peacefully. Ready to meet Jesus.

And by the way, I know these two women. I know something of their lives... of their own fears and terrors which they have overcome. They are living examples of what happens when we, the terrified, invite Jesus into our midst [Point down]... invite him to remind us why he is trustworthy [Open hands, held low]... invite him to fill us with his Spirit [Open hands, held up]... then choose to live in courageous obedience [Pointing fingers out].

## Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
  1. Why were the disciples afraid? Shouldn't the events earlier in the day have emboldened them? Can you share of a time of great fear? How much of it was unreasonable but real?
  2. What is the most common commandment in the Bible? How is Jesus' greeting to the disciples different?
  3. What is the significance of the phrase, "standing in the middle of them" as we think about how to find peace in the midst of our fear?
  4. Jesus gave the disciples several things to embolden them. What were they? Which of these do you need to claim in your own life?