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## **AFRAID TO BELIEVE IT!**

Many of us sitting here this morning have read this story so many times it seems to just fall off our tongue. We can almost recite it verbatim. Those of us who teach can put our Bibles down and simply tell the story to our children. As did our ancestors, we pass the story from generation to generation. Yet because it is so familiar, sometimes it is difficult for us to step back and place ourselves into the original event. How can we possibly imagine what it was like for the Apostles to hear the message of those women: Christ has risen! On that early Easter morning, there are several reactions.

The first is doubt! Doubt is the great challenger of our faith, immobilizing us, rendering us impotent before the challenges of life and leaving us incapable of great commitments of both earthly and eternal importance.

Think for a moment of any special relationship in your life: a marriage, a love relationship, a special friendship, a relationship with a child or parent. What is the one thing that holds that relationship together and allows you to communicate your deepest thoughts and feelings? It's trust. There must be no doubt in your mind that this person is sincere in his or her commitment. When your spouse tells you he is going to a meeting, it doesn't occur to you that he is not being truthful, not if you are committed to one another. If your child shares a secret with you, he or she does so knowing you can be trusted to keep the secret sacred. If your friend tells you she will do something, it will be done! If he says he will meet you, you know he will be there or call if there is an emergency. There is no room for doubt in a true relationship.

Our relationship with God is like that – there is no room for doubt about God's love for us. We know we can trust God. Of course, that doesn't mean that we don't wonder about the stories passed down from the mouths and pages written by human beings. It does not mean that we do not question and search and seek out new understandings of our faith. But it does mean that in spite of all the various interpretations, there is one interpretation upon which we can be secure –that God is real and God is love.

The other reaction to this Easter event that I found fascinating, even as a child, is **fear!** Now of course, when their future king has just been murdered, any news of Jesus is going to produce fear. And fear can be a very good thing, necessary in certain circumstances. All of us have known fear and must be capable of fear or we could be in great danger. But fear also produces some crazy circumstances and reactions.

I remember the story of a man on a commercial airliner during a storm who became so frightened that he plea-bargained with God. He said, "Lord, I'm a rich man. If you just let this plane land safely, I'll give you half of everything I own." When they landed safely, this man was first off the plane. As he collected his luggage, a minister who was on the plane with him tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Sir, I was on the plane with you and heard your prayer. I'm a man of the cloth and I'm here to collect on your promise." The man paused for a moment and said, "Well, I'll make the Lord an even better offer. If he ever catches me on a plane again, he can have it all."

We laugh at stories like that – and we laugh at our own fears. But fear is a healthy response to danger, and believe me, those early Christians lived in a constant state of danger. Fear was their early warning system, an emergency alert to mobilize their families for fight or flight.

While living in Florida I came in contact with various species that I simply called critters and I adapted to most. But there was one that always caused me to panic. One evening, I got out of the car

in the garage and was just going to get some things out of the trunk when I looked down and there, between my feet, was a black snake slithering past. In a flash, I responded. Before I knew it, I had jumped up into the trunk, swung around over the car and was in the house faster than I had ever moved in my life. I even managed to push the garage door button as I sailed by! Fight or flight? No question about it!

We need fear. It alerts us and sometimes prevents what can turn out to be big mistakes. We learn from fear. But it can also keep us from ever risking or trying new experiences, and even from following through on our commitments. That's what was happening to the Apostles!

Think about it. They had been with Jesus. They sat at his feet as he taught them. We read of Peter and Jesus discussing the prophecy of death and Peter making the great promise that he would never deny him. But they all ran. Why were they afraid?

First there was fear of injury or death. They didn't want to be physically or emotionally hurt for sure. We think only of physical persecution – of soldiers coming to do to them what has been done to Jesus. Maybe they would be used as examples – “if you stir up trouble in the Roman Empire, you die!”

But it was more than that. Can you imagine the disappointment they must have felt when Jesus – their leader, their hope for overthrowing the Roman government, was killed right in front of them? He was gone. Their grief was so deep – Jesus was like a brother. And even now, his own mother and brothers were considered family. Now, in the midst of all this grief, someone comes and says, “He's alive. He has risen.” Can we imagine what they were feeling?

Yes, there was fear of exposure. They had all scattered – run away. Peter denied even knowing him. How could they begin to tell such a story without being recognized and sought after? They were ashamed. They remembered his words, “You will all leave me.” If Jesus is back, how will they face him? There is fear of the unknown; the unfamiliar and uncertainty and the feeling of inadequacy. Certainly we have all felt these. If this story is true, what should they do? What does Jesus expect of them? If he rose up and left the tomb, where is he? And if they couldn't measure up the first time, how can they possibly face him now?

So they held back – withdrew. They turned inward and were crippled by fear. The two on the road didn't even recognize him, too afraid to even imagine the reality! And there was something else. Pride. Their pride caused them to be afraid and fear other people. They had put together a plan for the future – to get their lives back – and now Jesus was gone. What would people think now? What kind of fools were they? They had to sit back for a while.

Have you ever done that? My Dad used to call that “hunkering down.” You hunker down, take a deep breath and begin again. And you do so believing you can do it. As a child, I spent a lot of time with my Dad helping him fix things. I would sit and hand him tools and we would talk. One day he asked me to reach in and turn a particular screw on an engine as he held a part still. I wasn't sure if I understood exactly what he meant, but I picked up the tool and said, “I'll try.” He stopped me and said, “Joy, when you say you will try, it means you think you might fail. Tell me you will do it so I know you are doing your best.” Now of course, my Dad knew I might make a mistake and he might have to point out what needed to be done if I was confused. But his message was clear and I never forgot it. And I rarely say “I'll try” to this day. He wanted a positive attitude! He wanted me to believe in myself.

When we develop an attitude of negativity, it distorts our perception of the world, and limits us in ways we cannot imagine. It can even make us unloving and unpleasant. And in becoming negative, we lose our feeling of awe, and a sense of holiness and the majesty of God.

What is this thing called Easter? Resurrection? New life? What do we celebrate? We celebrate faith! It's a leap of faith that changes negativity to possibility, hate to love, and endings to beginnings. Faith is the alternative to fear – it was for those Apostles and it is for us. At first, they were too afraid to believe it. Until they were reminded by the breaking of bread—he took it and shared it and they remembered. They focused on Him - not their own fears, their own lives, but on the Risen One! And it changed their lives. It gave them hope. And it gives us hope every single day.

As we focus on Jesus today, we allow the inner part of us to be filled with the radiance of his reality and being. We acquire a confidence that is incredible. In medicine, it's what doctors call the "faith factor" as it works in healing our bodies. It works in recovery and it works in life.

Today we remember not only the power of God, but the power passed on to each one of us through this event and the memory of it. We center on the realization and consciousness of God. We begin to know Jesus not just as a historical figure, but as a constant companion. We see him with arms outstretched in love and we realize that we can resist fear. With fear defeated, we can open our hearts to the extraordinary power and love of God. Jesus did. The Apostles did. All those who have followed did. And today, we are invited to do it too. Just open your heart –and let it in. Happy Easter! Amen.