

Open the doors and the windows

Psalm 113; Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

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Fear is very bad advisor. If we allow our fears to dictate our life, we would not get into our cars in the morning for fear of an accident; we would not go up for our exams for fear of failure; we would not start a business for fear of bankruptcy; we would never enter into any relationship for fear of problems; we would never stand up against evil government – who knows the consequences.

Fear is, according to a dictionary I consulted:

a painful emotion or passion excited by the expectation of evil, or the apprehension of impending danger; it is related to apprehension; anxiety; alarm; dread.

We all know people who always talk about what they would love to do – but they never do it, because they are afraid to take the risk.

In our Gospel reading we have seen that the disciples of Jesus Christ, on the evening of the day on which He rose from the grave, were together in a house, or in a room, and they were afraid. Very afraid. Fear dictated their actions.

1 Behind locked doors

On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews. Easy to imagine! They were scared to death, they feared for their lives!

Just a few days before, the disciples had witnessed the killing of their master, Jesus, at the instigation of the Jewish leaders. Jewish mobs had been shouting: 'crucify him, crucify him'.

No wonder the disciples, who were known as followers of Jesus, were scared. They were still in a state of shock after the events of the past days, and they dreaded that the fate of Jesus could also become theirs.

The disciples were so scared that they stuck together, they locked the doors, and they must have also closed the shutters of the house. To keep evil outside.

The gloom of grief and fear can be so dark, that we do not even see the actual light of hope. Let me quote what a Doctor of the Church, St Peter Chrysologus, bishop in Ravenna in Italy around the year 450, said about their fear:

The extent of their terror and the disquiet caused by [the] atrocity had simultaneously locked the house **and the hearts** of the disciples and had so completely prevented light from having any access, that for their senses, overwhelmed more and more by grief, the murkiness of night increased and became more pervasive.

No darkness of night can be compared with the gloom of grief and fear because they are incapable of being tempted by any light of either consolation or counsel.

This Doctor of the Church was so right! Look at the disciples. What they had seen was the killing of Jesus, and this morning - an empty grave... Jesus had risen! But this had made them more disturbed than they already were.

'So lock the doors, let us try to not attract any attention of the religious leaders, or the heads of the army of the land, let us not give them any reason for now coming after us... Let us be extremely careful, because you can never know what they will do next...'

This must have been the state of mind of the followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. And **maybe** they would have been able to keep the Jews outside, but they could not keep their morbid **fear of death** outside; it filled their hearts.

I have lived here in Egypt long enough to have seen many Christians with this same attitude of trying to keep evil out by locking the doors.

We live in our Christian communities as if we live in a castle. The walls are thick, the bridges are drawn up, the gates are locked, the shutters closed.

The attitude is: If we keep our heads low, if we are invisible, then the rest of the population will not hurt us, hopefully. I do not mean to be critical; I love our Churches in Egypt. With many centuries of experience it is not strange that we have developed this rather defensive attitude.

2 Presence of Jesus changes everything

And **it is possible**, to a certain extent, to keep evil outside by locking the doors, but what we cannot lock outside, is fear. And sometimes you wonder what is worse, the evil that you fear, or the fear of evil... evil that usually never happens anyhow.

When the disciples of Jesus could not get out of the cycle of fear that darkened their hearts and minds, our Lord Jesus Christ himself intervened.

If you feel locked in cycles of worries, and fear, He can enter to bring light, and hope, and comfort, and joy, as he did for the disciples. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

In the case of the disciples, he physically entered their house. He can enter into our life as well, even in times when our minds and hearts are locked and sealed.

He can come into our life with light, to drive darkness out. This is what He did for the disciples. In an instant, darkness, sadness and fear, were gone, and the disciples were overjoyed!

What was the cause of the change for the disciples? How can we learn to be less afraid in our uncertain circumstances?

What made all the difference was not some piece of new theology, and also not some sort of power of positive thinking.

The fear of the disciples was not gone because the locks were strong enough, or because the Jews promised them they would not make their lives miserable. Their fear was not gone because some political powers promised

to protect them. Or because there was political stability again.

The difference was the presence of Jesus Christ himself. He came into their midst. The circumstances did not change, but Jesus entered in the midst of those circumstances.

To those who want to follow him, he offers peace. When Jesus said to his disciples: 'peace', this was not a pious wish, as we can wish someone a good day.

When Jesus says: 'peace', he effectively gives that peace to those who follow him. To those who dwell in darkness, his word 'peace' creates actual change. It makes the light flow in.

Who is this Jesus? Who is this person who can enter into a locked house without using the door... And who has the scar tissue in his hands, and side, and feet?

St Gregory of Nyssa, who became a bishop in 372 AD in what is now called Turkey, says this in his Great Catechism:

After his resurrection he showed himself whenever he wanted to his disciples. When he wished to be present with them, he was in their midst without being seen, needing no entrance through open doors... All of these occurrences, and whatever other similar facts we know about his life, require no further argument to show that they are signs of deity and of a sublime and supreme power.

His miraculous presence showed to his disciples that he was truly God. The grave had not been able to hold him. He is forever victorious, and he is with those who follow him. The powerful Lord and God is with us.

But our Lord and God also showed the disciples the scar tissue in his hands and his side. He could be touched. He had a real body. Not similar to ours, because his body was glorified. But he was definitely not a ghost.

After his resurrection our Lord God preserved something human in himself. He was not dehumanized; the impact of the incarnation was not deleted. That is why St John, when he describes our Lord in heaven, describes him as 'a Lamb, standing as though it had been slain'. (Rev 5:6)

Our Lord Jesus, after his resurrection and his return to the Father, has brought, in a manner we will never understand, an aspect of suffering humanity into the Triune God.

So the disciples, scared of what the Jews might want to do to them, now knew that Jesus Christ was risen, he was the living God, and he was also able to sympathize with their fears.

'We have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses', we read in Hebrews 4:15. He is with us in the midst of our suffering, and he knows about our feelings, and fears, and our problems.

He understands our desire to sometimes close the curtains, stay in bed, and lock ourselves in. Look at the scars on his body, and you know that we have a Lord who feels your hurts.

The presence of this Lord in our midst is therefore a reason for abundant joy. He is both able to help us, and he desires to help us.

3 Unlock the doors – go into the world

2009, St Jihn Maadi, 22 April 2012 St Michael

Jesus Christ gave peace to his followers in order to take away their fear. This peace was in fact the impact of Jesus Christ communicating himself to his followers.

The peace of Christ is not a commodity that can be received separate from Jesus Christ himself. Receiving his peace, means receiving him. And if He is in our midst, we have great peace.

Jesus gave himself to his friends, and that relieved them from their fears.

And immediately after taking this fear away, our Lord ordered them to unlock the doors, to open the windows, to no longer keep the danger out, but to actually do the opposite, and to go into the world – facing the dangers they once were so fearful of.

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

The peace of the Lord is liberating. His presence is liberating, because it takes fear away – fear of hell, fear of death, fear of enemies, fear of the unknown, fear of political forces, of religious powers, fear of 'what if...'

With this mission to go into the world with the Gospel message, our Lord also gave the apostles the means to do this. He gave them of Himself again, by giving them the Holy Spirit.

This, in order that they would have wisdom, strength, peace, love and joy in the midst of the trials and miseries they would face in life while living their Christian life. Jesus Christ did not actually change the dangers; he did not rescue the apostles out of their problems. He changed their hearts.

He changed them, to no longer fear those dangers. To no longer be paralyzed by worries. Jesus Christ himself entered into their life, so that they could be his witnesses in the midst of a hostile world.

Conclusion

And this is how our Lord Jesus Christ speaks today to all of us. The almighty Lord who is able to sustain and to strengthen you in the midst of all of life's circumstances, He will really do so, because He knows what we go through.

Let fear not darken your mind, your life. Jesus is risen! Whatever happens to us, he is the risen Lord who is able to also raise us from the dead. This means he can certainly come into your situation, in whatever matter you need him to stand by you.

He invites us, Christians, to not be afraid of whatever may befall us in life. Fear not, but rather, open the doors, get out of your castle. Live in the world with joy, be with your neighbours, your colleagues, your friends, and be yourself.

And let us speak to them of the things that are important for us without fear - including the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Fear not, says our Lord, for I am with you until the end of the world.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.