

Christ's Gift of Courage
Luke 24: 36-43
Sunday, April 10, 2016
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This week I had a little fun finding funny quotes. My weekly message suffered from it as I tried to find a clever description for “change” to precondition you for a few tiny changes to our worship service. The quote I ended up using says: “I welcome change; as long as nothing is altered or different.”

And after exploring the word change, I continued with the word courage because today, we are going to take a look at Christ's gift of courage to us through the resurrection.

Courage. We all use it every day. Some might say, getting out of bed in the morning is an act of courage. Defined by Merriam-Webster, courage is the ability to do something that you know is difficult or dangerous – that is the simple definition. The full definition is this: courage is the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.

Many famous people have left us their definition of courage. Nelson Mandela said, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. I felt fear myself more times than I can remember, but I hid it behind a mask of boldness. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” Winston Churchill said: “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”

And then there is my favorite. Picture it: 14 German shepherds all sitting in a row, and a black and white cat is walking/parading in front of them. And the inscription reads: “Courage: only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live!” That is one gutsy cat!

Courage is and can be learnt and practiced. There is no courage gene out there that makes some people more courageous than others. It is part of growing up, of learning to overcome fears that we

might have. It took me about 30 minutes as a child to overcome my fear of jumping off the 5 meter diving board to earn my swimming certificate. My mother was standing below and encouraging me, and eventually I did it. Then I did it two more times, and never again. I did not see the need for me to do it ever again.

I came across a book written by Polly Morland called **The Society of Timid Souls: or How to Be Brave**. Two things encouraged her to quit her job to write this book. The first thing was a story from 70 years ago. Back in 1942 in Manhattan, the pianist Bernard Gabriel assembled a small group of performers who had one thing in common – they wanted to cure their stage fright. They did it by practicing confronting their fear, acting as a hostile, booing audience for each other as they practiced. They called themselves: The Society of Timid Souls.

And secondly, being herself a “self-identified pathological worrier” got fed up with “our contemporary failure of our collective nerve” in which the media has surrendered to "a taxonomy of terror: the planet warming, the bankers squandering, the terrorists bomb-making, the pedophile lying-in-wait."

To combat it, she investigated the most ordinary and extraordinary of heroes: an elderly woman who threw herself into the path of an attacking Rottweiler to save a baby, a middle-age traveler whose hotel was leveled by an earthquake and who dug out her fellow guest, a mother who gives herself a Caesarean section in order to save her baby, as well as talks to whistle-blowers and free climbers. Are we born courageous or is it learned, she wonders. Her final conclusion, however, may just make us realize that we all have the potential to be what Morland calls a "Brave Soul." (1)

It not only takes courage to live life with all its fears and anxieties embedded in it, but to live life with faith. It takes courage to have faith in all that our Lord Jesus Christ is about, and stands for, and asks us to be. It takes courage to follow his teachings because they are so counter-cultural, so much the opposite of what society wants us to be and do. It takes courage to believe that Jesus is still with us, that his spirit still inspires and guides our lives. It takes courage to have this faith, because if we

embrace this faith fully, we are encouraged and told many a time that we can let go, should let go of fear and anxiety that dominates our life, our being.

How often are we being told by Jesus not to be afraid? It seems to be the mantra of the resurrection stories. Don't be afraid! Don't cry, he is not dead but alive! Why are you upset? He is not here but risen! These words are the hallmark of good news. This very sentence, "Do not be afraid!" is the very essence of the gospel.

Granted, it is hard for the characters in our resurrection stories not to be afraid. Earthquakes open graves, angels of the Lord appear with shining faces and clothing whiter than OxyClean could ever hope to get them, the dead walk through closed doors and offer an examination of wounds, break bread, and tell them not to be afraid. Kind of hard to do that after all that trauma they had just experienced.

And yet beside all that fear, there is joy. The message that he is risen is sinking in, because Jesus continues to show up among them.

Fear and joy are often partnered up. The fear of standing on that diving board – terrible. The joy after I managed to jump off the diving board – I can still feel it. Think of a situation in your life that was tinged by both fear and joy. I am thinking of the Guthries – their fear of how Jack will come out of his skiing accident, and yet their joy that he is still with them.

Fear and joy are close companions: Fear of what may happen to our children in a dangerous world; joy at the blessing they are to us and, we pray, they will be to the world. Fear of whether we will have a job in the year to come; joy at the colleagues that surround us. Fear about the fate of a loved one struggling with illness; joy in the gift that person has been to us. Fear about the future amid problems both national and global; joy in the present moment surrounded by those we love or people who show us their courage every day. Or to come a bit closer to home, fear about the future of our congregation and church; joy in our call to proclaim the gospel.

I think it's striking that the announcement of resurrection doesn't take away all the disciples' fear. Rather, it enables them to keep faith amid their fears, to do their duty and share their good news in spite of their anxiety. This is the very definition of courage.

Courage is what Easter is about. The coming to faith in Christ is not supposed to smooth all the rough places of life and still the tremors of this world, but I believe that the gospel gives us the ability to keep our feet amid the tremors and enables us not just to persevere but even to flourish when life is difficult.

"Don't be afraid!" – is repeated by Jesus over and over again. He acknowledges that fear is present and real. But as he continues to show up, making the resurrection real for them and us, he creates within them the possibility for joy and hope and courage and so much more.

Why?

Because it changes everything. In the resurrection, you see, we have God's promise that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient -- real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality.

Fear and joy, despair and hope, doubt and faith, these are the two sides of our lives in this world. But in the end we have heard the resurrection promise that joy, hope, and faith will ultimately prevail.

Christ's resurrection signals above and beyond all else, that our God is a God of new life and never-ending possibility. The good news of Christ's resurrection does not take away our fear -- though sometimes we wish desperately that it would -- but it does offer us the gift of courage and hope by anchoring us in the sure promise that God will have the last word, and that that word is one of light and life and grace and mercy and love and peace.

Don't be afraid! Amen.

(1)<http://www.oprah.com/book/Books-That-Boost-Confidence-The-Society-of-Timid-Souls#ixzz45FuZpa8l>



COURAGE

Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live.