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Love Soaking Fear (Luke 24. 36-48)

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Some time during my seventh year of life, my parents decided that my older brother needed a proper English-style boarding school education, so they sent him away to be moulded into the right material, leaving me to fend by myself. Up to then, I had shared spaces with him, most thoroughly at night where we slept in bunkbeds. All of a sudden following his departure, the nighttime became a battleground. Without his company, every unusual sound became laden with possible danger, every creak of the house's settling portentous with dark meaning. My imagination, overladen with visions gleaned from glimpses of *Doctor Who* from behind the living room couch, would run rampant with unfolding scenes of sea monsters, Daleks and other monstrosities - all too likely to be unleashed on the unsuspecting inhabitants of my unremarkable suburban home.

Given that my bed was the last defence against the certainty of being thus overrun, it became a fortress. Not only were my soft toys strategically placed all around the perimeter at night, I also became practiced at sleeping with my bedclothes pulled up over my head, a tiny air hole made every now and then with trembling hands when I became too starved of oxygen. I would regularly wake drenched in sweat or half-strangled by a sheet, the majority of the bedclothes on the ground and teddies strewn across the floor like a hurricane had hit. But, as you can see, I'm here to tell the tale, so it must have been a worthwhile price to pay.

Fear. It's scary what it can do when you feel alone.

The disciples in today's gospel reading aren't actually alone in that they have each other. But in the context of what's been happening in recent days, a collective feeling of isolation is all they have. Their anticipation that the one they had given up everything to follow had been "the one to redeem Israel" has seemingly been proven unfounded and all has been lost. They are merely a remnant, with no clear vision for the future, and no doubt in fear of their lives.

In this context, the disciples have gone from a sense of hope-filled futures to ones filled by an expectation of hopelessness. They have already decided that they are on their own in having to deal with whatever is coming next - maybe they too, along with the soldiers and rulers a few days earlier, had been thinking that Jesus would have 'saved himself' from crucifixion? Have they instead been left with the prospect of a universe in which God has stubbornly remained hidden and virtually impotent?

So it makes sense that on the road to Emmaus, the two travellers had failed to see the risen Jesus in their companion, and it makes sense that in the passage we have heard today, the disciples assume that they are seeing (even having just been told of his transformed reality) a ghost. The gospel writer tells us they were "startled and frightened", and Jesus himself proclaims them "troubled" and full of "questionings" in their hearts. We are told that they "disbelieved for joy" - in our modern language, that its too good to be true. It is only in the most mundane activity of Jesus eating a piece of fish that it seems they are convinced of what has happened (although, even then, there is no phrase like 'and then they believed'). Despite this, Luke's gospel ends with the disciples returning to the temple in Jerusalem 'blessing God' with 'great joy.'

So what are we to make of all this? What are the implications for us in reading of Jesus's followers' frankly very mixed reactions to the Resurrection?

Along with the doubt, which we heard about last week centred on the person of Thomas, there is an awful lot of fear expressed in the resurrection narratives. In the earliest gospel, Mark, the women who go to the tomb are told by the young man in white to report Christ's risen nature to the rest, but they flee, remaining silent with "trembling and astonishment" "for they were afraid". In the Gospel of John, Christ appears to the disciples in a locked room, the doors being shut "for fear of the Jews". In Matthew's gospel, the angel appears and we hear that the guards "trembled and became like dead men." In this narrative, the women rush from the tomb "with fear and great joy", and then Jesus appears and exhorts them to "not be afraid." Where are we in all of this?

There is a popular movement within at least Westernised society today that would banish fear as an admissible emotion. One of its chief progenitors was the American psychiatrist, Gerald Jampolsky who, in the late 1970s, urged us to see fear as opposite to love and suggested that by changing our attitudes of mind, we might begin to overcome fear as an option. Thus a simple binary between love and fear was born, and its one which social media and the Internet are hugely fond of. “The moment you feel any fear - let go” urges Lonerwolf.com, while lifehack.org suggests we “let go of fear and become unstoppable”! Many more commentators - New Age, faith-based and purely secular, are blowing the same trumpet. It sounds like a plan, right?

It is interesting that new-born humans enter the world seemingly largely free of fear. Many of us will have had the warm and fuzzy pleasure of holding babies in their first few months of life. While of course they have a preference and need for mum’s company above all others, they will mostly willingly be passed into the hands of strangers with welcoming open eyes and even the occasional smile. It seems that fear in the early months is only expressed as a reaction to sudden loud noises and to falling. The fear of strangers seems to begin only around the fifth or sixth month of life, but up to then it is apparent that the natural inclination of the newly born is towards openness, rather than shutting down in fear.

It seems then that at least some, maybe most, of this development must be a learned response, delivered to the child in the conditioned responses of the caregivers. And certainly there are good reasons for this. We have probably all heard of species that have become extinct through being too trusting of their environment, and we would no doubt all agree that it is part of the caregiving role to communicate repeatedly the need not to touch the hot stove or to wait for instruction about safety in crossing roads. However, we may also be aware, either in our own lives or of those we know, of the deadening of the spirit that comes with being strongly risk-averse, and of turning away repeatedly from the call to adventure. And so we may wonder, what might it be like to reclaim, at least to some extent, the newborn’s sense of freedom from fear and openness to possibility, to enoughness, even to bounty and abundance?

In a number of ways, it seems that the disciples taken as a whole tended towards the 'all-or-nothing' persona. At one moment they are bemoaning the lack of food at the gathering of the 4000 (or 5000) in the desert, at the next they are coming near to Jerusalem and supposing "that the kingdom of God (is) to appear immediately." Individually, too, they could be described as flaky - witness Peter's denials of Christ having said he would accompany him to prison and death, or Judas's selling of his former hero for the sake of a cash prize. It seems that, when the chips are down, they are more interested in merely surviving, rather than thriving. They, like those of us today overly conditioned by fear, were operating largely by the scarcity principle.

There is, of course, an alternate possibility to seeing our life's course in such terms. In John, Chapter 10, Jesus proclaims that he has come "that they may have life, and have it abundantly." The addition of that second clause is so important, and it changes everything. Abundance implies an open acceptance of richness, of plenitude, of more-than-enoughness; it almost implies limitlessness. How different is this to merely existing, and always fearing the end of that existence? Cynthia Bourgeault calls this promise of Jesus evidence of his "freewheeling ... spirit", a "generosity bordering on (extravagance)."¹ It is evidenced in his exhortation not to store up treasures on earth, in the understanding that something much more enduring awaits - the receipt of the Kingdom, here and now. It is about an expectation, as Bourgeault says, "of abundant fullness, so long as one does not attempt to hoard or cling."²

Richard Rohr mirrors this thinking in one of his resurrection homilies. Most of us, he says, operate "in a world of scarcity, where there's never enough", whereas the Resurrection really invites us to draw on "infinite Love ... infinite Possibility."³ Similarly to Bourgeault, he suggests that, in our fear, we hoard life, love and spirit within ourselves for fear of it running out, not realising that the universe is filled with grace and newness, and ever-renewing.

¹ Bourgeault, C., *The Wisdom Jesus*. (Boston, Mass, 2008) p. 69.

² *ibid.*, p. 70.

³ Richard Rohr Daily Meditation series: 'Resurrection through Connection', April 5, 2024.

In coming back to our theme of the newborn child's sense of freedom from fear and openness to possibility, it could be seen that part of Jesus' exhortation to his disciples to become like a child in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven might be an urging of us to reclaim a sense of childlike wonder at the pattern and shape of the universe. And this would include reclaiming the child's sense of fearlessness.

Nonetheless, practically speaking, it must be admitted that we *are* not children and we *do* have multiple examples from life to draw on that warn us to be wary, to be calculating, to look before we leap. So, how exactly does resurrection thinking change all that? Well, perhaps it is about not dividing ourselves into all-or-nothing being, as shown by the disciples in those earlier examples. When Jesus suggests to them that they should not be afraid, he is not denying them the truth of their fear. He is saying that despite their fear and unbelief, they can be assured that their survival-based low expectations have been subverted once and for all. So it is not about banishing and denying any parts of us that are fearful - if we do that, we end up being divided against ourselves. As philosopher Alan Watts says, in our efforts to be brave and not fearful, we submit to the primacy of fear. And then, "the effort to be brave is fear trying to run away from itself."⁴ Thus it is not about letting safety be our ultimate goal, as this really only gives us a sense of isolation, of aloneness. It is instead about allowing our fearful expressions to be, but to soak them in present-moment Christ consciousness.

If we do this, we do not fall prey to that temptation to 'hoard' or 'cling' to God's grace, God's infinite possibility. After all, it's not like that is being given once for all, and our bank balance is going to dwindle over time. It is ever-renewing, if we are open to it, and it transcends moments of scarcity, moments of fear, and of death itself. It is actually truly and fully liberating. To quote Meister Eckhart, "The person who lives in the light of God is conscious neither of time past nor of time to come but only of one eternity."⁵ This is truly non-dual living where we do not separate ourselves from God, but live from what we share of the divine perspective.

⁴ Watts, A. - *The Wisdom of Insecurity* (New York & Canada, 2011) p. 79.

⁵ Quoted in Watts, A. - *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, p. 144.

Ultimately, Jesus's 'Do not be afraid' is not a simple admonishment. He isn't talking all-or-nothing binaries between love and fear. Instead, love includes fear, and is inclusive of every other human emotion and expression too. In doing so, it transcends any one individual human expression, the divine whole being greater than the sum of our limited parts. So all of this is to say that it's ok to feel fear. The parts of us that are fearful need love, the Love that created the universe, and we can receive that love like children who are in our first six months of life - with openness and wonder, like every moment of our lives is full of limitless gift and grace. Then, our expression of fear is allowed, but it is not the final word which is one, instead of celebration. Then we can say, with the psalmist:

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Beasts and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples,

princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and maidens together,

old men and children!

Let them praise the name of God ...

Ultimately, it is praise and wonder that endure, real Love soaking fear in caring recognition until it finds itself melting away into the arms of nurturance.