**Giving Courage to the Coward**

Based on [Acts 5:12-32](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Ac5.12-32) and [John 20:19-31](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Jn20.19-31)

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Easter 2

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A Young Fawn once said to his Mother, "**You are larger than a dog, and swifter, and more used to running, and you have your horns as a defense; why, then, O Mother! do the hounds frighten you so**?" She smiled, and said, "I know full well, my son, that all you say is true. **I have the advantages you mention, but when I hear even the bark of a single dog I feel ready to faint, and fly away as fast as I can**."

That was one of Aesop's Fables, and the moral of the story is "**No [amount of] argument will give courage to the coward.**"

As we continue in the Easter season, one thing we observe every year is how the Apostles of Jesus Christ--upon his death on the cross--proved themselves to be such great cowards. **And in today's Gospel lesson--on the evening of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ--it says that the disciples were gathered together in a room with locked doors because they were afraid of the Jews.**  Jesus disciples were afraid, terrified that they would be arrested for supporting Jesus.

And is not their cowardice is understandable? They showed courage when Jesus was with them. **But Jesus had not been with them since the time of his arrest.** The shepherd had been struck and the sheep were scattered. In this locked room, the sheep had indeed gathered back together, but they did so in fear and still without their shepherd. None of them knew what to do.

They were cowards. And yet we saw in our First Lesson today that these cowards eventually do get it together. Eventually they find courage enough to minister publically before the Jews that they once locked their doors to. Our First lesson from Acts 5 says that, **they were performing openly many signs and wonders, healing the sick and the people held them in high esteem...and multitudes of both men and women were believers added to the Lord**.

We also see that when the disciples were not just being paranoid when they had feared hostility from the Jews. Their former fear of being arrested for supporting Jesus was clearly justified. For Acts 5 says that while they were ministering in Christ's Name, "**the high priest rose up, and all who were with him. and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison."**

Their former fear was justified; and yet, the fear that once made them lock their doors, did not prevent them on this occasion from preaching publically. What had happened to their fear of the Jews? It wasn’t arguments that overcame their fear. It was the Peace of Christ won for them by his wounds and given them by the Holy Spirit.

Aesop is right. It wasn't arguments that persuaded these cowards into men of courage, because there is no rational reason to walk into death. When he was being arrested Jesus told Peter to put down his sword. **Jesus was calling him not to fight for the kingdom, but to suffer for it, and to Peter that made no sense. No amount of clever persuasion could have convinced Peter that he should simply walk into suffering and death without a fight like his master.** And here, with Jesus gone and without the Holy Spirit to give them comfort and peace, no lofty argument could persuade the disciples to not fear the threatening bark of the Jews. They were relying on themselves, and so they were cowards.

We are born sinful; and that means we are born cowards. By our nature we seek above all things to preserve our life and avoid suffering above. To the natural man, death is the end, the great equalizer. **To the natural man, death is god because it cannot be overcome by any man.** But the Good News of the Resurrection is that one man did overcome death: Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God. And in his death he showed us how to die--not with fear and terror--but with faith that our Heavenly Father, who once gave us life and breath will do so again on the Last Day. **Because in the resurrection of His Son, He has promised to do so.** And whenever that promise is preached and heard the Holy Spirit is at work to create such confidence.

Wherever there is courage, there is always a spirit at work. I do not say it is the Holy Spirit, because there are many false spirits that lead people to willingly suffer and die for lost causes. **But no man faces death willingly unless a spirit is at work causing that person to believe what the eye cannot verify…that there is something more powerful and more certain and greater than death.** There is certainly a spirit at work in a suicide bomber, a spirit that assures him that his death is a means rather than an end.

There is a spirit at work in false religions, because the hallmark of religion is the conviction that there’s something after death. **In fact the word "religion" has been downplayed today for the word “spirituality”, indicating the general conviction that there’s more to “life and death” than what we see.** This is the common denominator of all spiritualities, even Christian. What generic spirituality fails to realize though is that not every spirit is the Holy Spirit. 1 John 4 says, “**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the anti-Christ, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already**.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, understand this. Just because someone is spiritual doesn’t mean they are better-off. There is the spirit of the anti-christ, and whoever has that spirit is just as spiritual as those who have the Holy Spirit. They are spiritual and yet damned, condemned, without God and without hope—spiritual as the are—if they don’t confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

And so it is that on that first Easter evening, one of the disciples, Thomas, was not with them when Jesus came in the flesh. So the other disciples told him, “**We have seen the Lord**.” But he said to them, “**Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe**.”

Thomas often gets a bad rep for his doubting here. And rightfully so, in a sense. The others had received the Holy Spirit and had confessed to him that Jesus had come in the flesh! **Clearly, in their confessing to Thomas what they saw, the Holy Spirit was working in what Thomas heard.** But Thomas resisted the Holy Spirit. Thomas doubted when He should have believed.

On the other hand, while he didn’t have the right standard for believing, he was right in what the content of his belief had to be. His concern was to know that Jesus Christ had come not as a ghost or a spirit or a figment of their imagination**. He knew that if Jesus had not come *in the flesh,* then he had not really come in any way beneficial to faith.** Jesus promised, “**The Son of Man must suffer many things, die and on the third day rise again**.” As Paul so astutely puts it, "**If Christ is not raised from the dead our faith is in vain.**”

Thomas was right that a spiritual Jesus would do his faith no Good, because it is a flesh and blood Jesus that died, and it is only a Jesus that returned with flesh and blood that can be said to have defeated death and truly have truly overcome the grave. And so he says famously, “**Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe**.”

Eight days later, the disciples were together again, this time with Thomas. If they received courage the week before, it seems they lost it because the doors were locked again. **A good argument for how Christians have a spiritual need to go to church and receive Christ week**. At any rate, Jesus invites Thomas to touch his flesh, and not just any flesh, his very wounds, the battle scars of the victory over death. From the time he hhad heard from his brothers the good news, Thomas had been resisting the Holy Spirit. But Jesus tells him not to resist, but believe. And Thomas believes, and then he does what a heart newly filled with the Holy Spirit can’t help but do, he confesses, “My Lord and My God.”

By nature we are cowards, and we could never face adversity in this life without hiding from our enemies and biting back at those who sin against us. And no rational arguments can convince you that it’s a good idea to face your enemies, to suffer or die if you can avoid it. **Without the Gift of the Holy Spirit, you and I and all disciples of Christ are ruled by fear and self-preservation. And yet, even though you have not seen the flesh of Jesus, let alone touched his wounds, you believe.** And for that Jesus calls you Blessed. Your faith is not the result of arguments or of your own decision; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit deposited into your hearts by the word of Christ conquering death and the grave and raised in the flesh for your justification.

Martin Luther once said, “**Is it not true that God’s Word is greater and more important than faith? For God’s Word is not based and built on faith, but faith is built on God’s Word. Besides, faith may waver and change, but God’s Word remains eternally**.” Thomas believed because he saw, blessed are you who have not seen the flesh of Christ, but heard his Word, and as a result believe that he is here today in the flesh and blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins, for the resurrection of the body and for the life everlasting.