

"The Crucial Test" **[based on John 20:19-31]**

David was just a young boy, son of a pastor. He had to be careful when he was playing games with his friends. He had to wear a crash helmet every time he went out.

One day, David climbed a tree and missed a step on his descent and he had to be rushed to the hospital. His parents were terrified. He had a concussion and was in a coma.

David woke up, and he wasn't in Kansas anymore. He awoke to a place of love and peace; he could **feel** it. Then he saw an angel, all in white, who came over to David and said, "Follow me, David." He did, and the angel introduced him to Jesus...to Jesus! He saw and felt such wonderful things.

Then, just as suddenly, he woke up again to find his frightened parents, relieved that their son was gaining consciousness. David told them what he had seen and felt. He told them about the angel introducing him to Jesus, and then, he woke up.

A person would think that news of heaven's reality would be welcomed in the small town. However, this was not the case. David's father, the pastor, was almost dismissed from the congregation he served. Attendance at his church plummeted. Several townspeople ridiculed his family. School children taunted David and his sister Cassie.

These events provoked the Pastor, and he asked his congregation, "Why does the possibility that heaven is real, upset you?" The answer is, that if heaven were real, it would affect the way people lived their lives.

The empty tomb had shocked and troubled the disciples. They had spent the day trying to determine what the events of that Sunday meant. They knew two things - their lives would now be changed, and they were scared. The gospel writer notes in verse 19, that the disciples were hiding behind locked doors.

Though they had heard Mary's report that she had seen the risen Lord, they didn't know what to do with that news. They still feared the Jewish authorities—believing that they might choose to further neutralize Jesus' rebellion by eliminating Jesus' followers. Unlike Mary, they may have been **afraid** to see Jesus. After all, they had abandoned Him after his arrest, and Peter had denied Him, three times.

It is humiliating to admit that not only does fear control our lives, but it also determines the direction of our lives, much more than opportunities do. The disciples were enchained by their fear of the Jewish authorities.

Fear can paralyze us and we miss opportunities to meet interesting people, just because they are strangers. The fear of crowds can even encapsulate us in our homes. We risk being kept within the confines of our comfortable, little worlds, because of our fear of the unknown. Perhaps FDR, the wartime president of the U.S. was correct when he said, "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself."

The natural thing to do when we are feeling anxious or threatened, is to hunker down and lock the doors, to become focused on our own security, rather than the risky mission to which we are called. The promise of this text, is that Jesus cannot be stopped by our locked doors.

Can our faith grow without a little doubt? Thomas always seems to get a bad rap when it comes to the subject of faith. Thomas' doubts are no greater than the other disciples' doubts. His absence from the first appearance, allows Jesus one more opportunity to teach the disciples.

Thomas is a person who needs to experience. Some people learn better by doing something, rather than reading it in a book. Thomas must experience the Risen Saviour for himself, with all his senses.

It's not so much that he didn't believe the other disciples, but he must see for his own sake, for his faith to grow. Again, John notes that the door is locked, yet Jesus enters, then Jesus offers Thomas what he asks for, to touch His wounds. Thomas immediately proclaims, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus comes to us, as He came to the first disciples, right in the middle of our fear, pain, doubt, and confusion. He comes speaking peace, breathing into our anxious lives the breath of the Holy Spirit. Jesus appears to his disciples - locked doors are not a barrier to Him.

One would think that to overcome fear, Jesus would give the disciples courage. But He knew that they already had courage. They had been with Him for the whole three years of His earthly ministry. He knew their hearts better than they did.

Instead, he gives them peace - shalom. The peace that Jesus gives is not limited to the absence of conflict. Jesus' peace is a wholistic peace. In a sense, it is an "everything is right with the world" type of peace. That peace comes in the person of the Holy Spirit.

The peace that Jesus grants us, is one caused by His presence. We are not alone, and Jesus has promised to be with us always until the end of time. We know what this peace is like.

Some of us have faced daunting health issues, while experiencing a peace that passes all understanding, because we knew that God was with us. Others of us have experienced overwhelming financial and vocational upheaval. We have been able to walk through these times because of God's presence and the peace that it provided us.

As a congregation, we face the frustration, and seemingly insurmountable obstacles to continue our worship in this place. We are not immobilized by the situation or overcome by our fear, because God is always present with us. Our peace is not connected to our personal strength, though we certainly rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. Neither is our peace dependent upon our intelligence, the depth of our faith, or the determination of our personality. Our peace is based upon the love, grace, and presence of God.

It is amazing how Christians have made the gospel self-serving, self-centered, and self-ish, throughout the centuries. Many read this story of Jesus and His disciples and believe that the peace Jesus gives, is for them alone, that the Holy Spirit is given to allow **them** to have spiritual experiences and feel close to God. They are blessed so that they can enjoy not only an abundant life, but also an affluent life. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

Once the disciples receive peace through the presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus sends them out, just as God the Father, sent Him. This is a recurring pattern in John's Gospel: the connection between heaven and earth. God the Father has sent Jesus to earth to proclaim God's message of love for humankind. Jesus then sends out His disciples to continue that ministry.

This established a tradition from God, to Christ, to the Disciples, and to the Christian community. The Holy Spirit represents the ongoing presence of God and Christ, within the lives of Jesus' disciples.

We too are sent. We may not be sent far. We may only be sent to our families, our neighborhood, or our place of employment. The important thing is that we understand that we are sent. We are sent on a mission wherever we can share God's love and grace, and to bear witness to what God has done in our lives.

It's okay to be fearful and it's okay to doubt. It is not the face of Jesus, but rather the scars on His hands which provide the proof of how much we are loved.

This is the crucial test of our belief.

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.
Because He lives, all fear is gone.*

Amen.