**SERMON: "FEAR LOCKED BEHIND CLOSED DOORS"**

(John 20:19-31 Preached at MPC on April 8, 2018 Farewell Sermon)

In today's gospel text, it was Easter evening.  Jesus had victoriously risen from the tomb that early morning.  One of the disciples had seen the empty tomb, and John tells us that he believed.  Mary Magdalene had seen the risen Christ and had recognized him when he called her name.  At Jesus' command, she went to find the rest of the disciples so that she could tell them what had happened.

But now, John tells us, that evening—Easter evening—the disciples went into hiding—locked themselves into a room "for fear of the Jews."  They had seen the fury of the Jewish leaders directed at Jesus and assumed that they might be next.

The disciples assumed, rightly I'm sure, that the Jewish leaders would be happy to root them out as the last remnants of the Jesus-heresy.  The disciples could imagine themselves being hunted down like animals.  If the Jewish leaders could kill Jesus, nobody was safe.   I can imagine them hiding behind that locked door—quiet as a mouse—listening for footsteps—fearing a knock at the door—imagining the worst.

Of course, the beloved disciple, "John" who was surely among them, had seen the empty tomb and had believed—but we are not sure exactly what he believed.  Mary had come to them with her tall tale about seeing Jesus alive—but that didn't make much sense.  The disciples weren't sure what to believe, but it is clear that they didn't believe Mary.  They didn't know what to do either but figured "Better Safe than Sorry!" So, they went into hiding.

They were "shaking in their boots" afraid.  If I had been there, I would have been afraid too.  A crucifixion is a terrible thing—to see a body bloodied and battered like that—and it was especially terrible to see Jesus treated that way.  They had believed in Jesus—they loved Him and had left everything to follow Jesus. Now they could hardly believe that it had ended so terribly.

We all go into hiding at some point in our lives because we fear something.  There are times when we just want to pull the covers over our heads so that we don't have to deal with it.  When I was only 5 years old and living up in Halawa Heights, I recall pulling the covers over my head when one of the first major hurricanes to strike the islands came that night! For some reason I thought it was going to be so cold in the house all from the howling wind and rain, I bundled up wearing two pairs of pajamas. All I remember is the sound of the wind outside but mostly I was sweating so badly under all the blankets I forgot how afraid I was. That was in 1953! Moving ahead to 2018, I would venture to say that all of us we live in a world right now that keeps us in the locked behind a door called fear at times.

Just a couple of months ago on Saturday January 14, 2018, we all remember the emergency alert notification sent out that morning that read "BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL." Hawaii Gov. David Ige told CNN that human error caused the alert to go out.

He said, "It was a mistake made during a standard procedure at the changeover of a shift, and an employee pushed the wrong button." The warning went out to television and radio as well as cell phones, Ige added. Ige also tweeted that he is meeting with top defense and emergency management officials from the state "to determine what caused this morning's false alarm and to prevent it from happening again." That would be nice!

The Bible talks about wars and rumors of wars, and that sounds like something out of the morning news. James Woolsey, former Director of the C.I.A. under President Bill Clinton said in April of 2003 that we are now engaged in World War IV.  He thinks of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as World War III—a war that lasted half a century.  World War IV against terrorism officially started at the World Trade Center Buildings on 9/11.  Woolsey wouldn't guess how long World War IV might last but the thought is that it would be with us for many years.  I'm sure he is right in some ways.

But, of course, it doesn't take something as dramatic as World War IV to frighten us—to make us want to go inside and lock the doors.  There are smaller, more personal things that frighten us as well—the stress levels of daily living that could cause a lump or growth where there shouldn't be any—blood where there should be no blood—a dark spot on an X-ray.  When a loved one is sick really sick the thought of illness crowds out everything else.

But we can find ourselves afraid even when there are no life and death issues at stake.   Or how about walking into a critical exam unprepared—or to walk out of that exam feeling that we didn't have a clue.  At times like that, it seems as if the rest of our

lives are at stake. Or how about its 1am in the morning and your son or daughter isn't

home yet. Or the money runs out before the month is over. Or the old car starts making

wheezing and making new noises. Or we notice a damp spot on the ceiling and realize that the roof is now twenty-five years old!

Or how about the reality we fear about losing our job.  How would you like to be fifty years old, have two kids in college, and lose your job?  It happens to people all the time—A typical story that made the news is the story about a television executive—he was making good money and feeling pretty good about his life.  Then his station was acquired by a major network and the new management found someone younger who would work for less money.  They didn't even ask him if he would work for less money—they just told him to clean out his desk.

It sounded like the end of his world, but the story is he dusted himself off, looked at his options, and started his own niche advertising business.  He isn't getting rich.  He isn't making as much money as he used to make—but he doesn't want his old job back.  He thinks that getting fired may have saved his life.  The stress in his old job was so great that he doesn't know how long he could have taken it.  Life isn't perfect for him now, but life isn't over for him either.

Let me say that one more time.  Life isn't perfect for him now, but life isn't over for him either.  He's doing all right.  We need to hear that.  Sometimes we think of our lives as so fragile that we could never survive a failing grade or the loss of a job or a serious illness. Maybe it's the death of a loved one or any one of a thousand disasters.

The truth is that God didn't make us so fragile.  We don't have to shatter into a thousand pieces when things go wrong.  We can make choices.  When life knocks us down, we can choose to lie there, or we can choose to get up and start again.  We can choose to cower behind locked doors, or we can choose to walk in the sunlight. Everything hangs on our choices.

And when things do go wrong, a great deal depends on what we think of God.  When times are tough, it's good to know that we walk with a mighty God and God walks with us.  On that first Easter evening, the disciples forgot that.  They saw Jesus crucified, and assumed that was the end of the story.  They went into hiding and locked the door for fear that they would be next.  They couldn't imagine that even God could bring their dead hopes back to life. But then Jesus appeared in their midst—walked through that locked door and enters the room to say, "Peace be with you."

The disciples needed to hear that.  "Peace be with you."  Their nerves were jangled, and their hopes were dashed.  They were scared to death.   But Jesus shows up and was alive and well—They could see and witness God's miracle! Their meeting with Jesus on that Easter evening transformed their lives.  They would often face many dangers in the future, but they would never again cower in a locked room, afraid for their lives. The disciples were never terrified again, because they knew that God was with them.  God is with us too and we all need to remember that.

A woman named Marianne Uhlig (pronounced UH-lig) once sailed from the United States to Japan on a Danish freighter. There weren't many passengers aboard, so she got to know the ship's captain.  One night, the captain said, "Do you know how I learned the meaning of trust? Let me tell you." He said that his wife and daughter, a little girl of 8 or 9 years old at the time, had accompanied him on one of his trips.  They ran into a big storm, and he ordered all hands-on deck.  They checked the lifeboats and prepared to launch them if necessary.  Then he sent word to his wife to get their daughter ready.

The mother wakened the daughter, saying, "Get up quickly.  There's a storm and the boat is in danger."  The little girl looked at her mother and said, "Mommy, is Daddy at the wheel?" Her mother said yes, he was at the wheel. The little girl said, "Then everything will be all right!" And with that she turned over and fell asleep again.

When faced with darkness—with wars and rumors of wars—with medical tests that give us answers that we don't want to hear—with children who won't do what we want them to do—with the loss of a job—with whatever might be troubling us. Let us always remember one major thing! That our Father, almighty God is at the wheel of our ship.  That doesn't mean that we won't face storms.  Neither does it mean that our ship won't take a battering at times!  But it does mean that God has us in the palm of his hand—Our Lord Jesus Christ is the one who loves us and is committed to saving us. (Lift the card by Judy and Dick!).

A German mystic, Catholic priest and theologian by the name of John Tauler wrote these words long ago.  They are good words for the dark nights of our soul.  Tauler said: Be sure of this: "There is no creature ever made by God who can set you free or help you; only God can do it." Jesus did that for the disciples—the ones hiding behind that locked door.  He came through that locked door and set them free, saying, "Peace be with you." But Jesus didn't leave it at that.  He gave them their marching orders, saying, "As the

Father has sent me, even so I send you." When we're afraid, it's always good to have

someone we can totally trust to tell us what to do.  Jesus did that for those disciples. He continues to say, as the Father has sent me, even so I send you." Jesus was sending them to continue his work and he continues to send us. Then he gave the disciples their source of strength.  He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."  He was telling them that the Spirit of God would be with them within them—leading, guiding and empowering them.

Friends, by now, all of you should have received a letter from me this week to formally annouce my official retirement as your pastor. It's a letter every Pastor perhaps dreads or even is a little fearful to write when the time come to say goodbye. As my letter stated, it was written with mixed feelings of sadness and peace that after 5 years of ministry, I will be stepping down as your pastor and teaching elder effective July 31st, 2018.

Margie and I have been in prayer for some time and we truly believe God has answered our prayer and guided us to this decision. We both feel MPC and MPP is in a better place today than we first came on the scene in August of 2013—both church and pre-school has shown steady growth in families both in the military and local sectors of our local Mililani community— we pray and ask God's blessings on this church and preschool to continue to grow and ensure its fruit bearing value to appreciate over the years for God's Kingdom.

We both want to say mahalo nui to MPC for its welcoming spirit of aloha and acknowledge and applaud the steady team work attitude and cooperation between our session elders and our ministry teams. Right now, working with our PEET ministry team, we already have a prescribed timetable for the process for my replacement both at the presbytery level with executive presbyter Linda Culbertson, and with Rev. Liz Leavitt, serving on the committee for ministry at Christ's Church Uniting at the local level. Margie and I will deeply miss all the wonderful people and friendships we have encountered over our time on the island, and we are so grateful for all the love, aloha, and support from our MPC Ohana.

Friends, "let no fear rule this day"—rest assured, MPC is in good hands with our current leadership—trust that God will provide and guide the next team of new blood and energy to carry on the work of Christ today, tomorrow, and beyond. "Peace be with You." Amen!