

## *You are the Answer*

Psalm 16 and John 20:19-31

It's a familiar story – not only because it is read on this Second Sunday of Easter every year in the lectionary cycle, so you probably have heard it before - or often. But it is familiar because it resonates with our human psyche and experience. We know about doubt and fear. We have felt them both. In fact, we are probably experiencing them both right now in varying degrees, given the mixture of troubling circumstances which circulate all around us these days. I'd like to concentrate on *fear* this morning. There's always plenty of room for doubt and questioning, but I think *fear* is a very serious dynamic in our lives and in our nation, in our church, in our world right now.

No wonder the disciples were frightened, holed up in that room with the door locked. Their very lives were under threat. Maybe the same fate as Jesus their leader awaited them – a horrible thing to consider – and he wasn't there to reassure them - or so they thought. No wonder they were terrified. Their fear was realistic. And so is ours - sometimes.

Now *fear* can be a positive response to a situation. It can get us out of harm's way – enabling you to jump out of the path of a car headed straight at you. It can prompt you to take your medicine or exercise regularly to avoid another heart attack. It can lead you to amazing acts of heroism or altruism or even self-protection.

But fear can also have less positive results – in fact, detrimental ones. It can lead to withdrawal, hiding away, denying, scapegoating, getting locked up and locked in, fear-mongering. When we become very anxious about coming apart, we become unable to see the possibility of growth. Not the best response to even reasonable fears, right?

So what do we do in the face of fear? What is the best answer, the best and healthiest response, to *fear*? Especially to the sick ungrounded vicious kinds of fear that can cripple us, hurt others damage society - and for us Christians, direct us into unfaithful behaviors. The answer is to *resist*.

Now *resist* is a popular by-word today- particularly in the political scene. It is the motto and the credo for many movements seeking to redress stances that they feel are unjust. *Keep the resistance going* was the heading of more than one email I received recently – and it plays out across the country in marches, placards, demonstrations, letters, editorials, blogs. It seems quite ubiquitous. I am not going to address the validity behind such actions or to evaluate their motives and effectiveness, at least not here am I going to reveal my biases. I simply want to insist that long before our current political scene, *resistance* was a Biblical mandate. It goes way back to the Old Testament prophets and it was carried forth in Jesus' teachings, in the spread of early Christianity, in the faithful exercise of church ministries today – and certainly in the personal lives of believers, our lives.

Some Biblical verses seem to say that God will take care of everything to bring about the Kingdom and will do it in God's own time. That may be true, but it doesn't really let us off the hook.

We have a role to play in that eventuality. We've been invited/sent out to share in, to participate in, the inauguration of the reign of justice and peace that God intends for all God's creatures and creations. And God delights when we discover the capacity to resist forces of domination, oppression, and death. You, in the singular and in the plural, You are the answer to the fears which threaten to overwhelm and cripple us and our society and the broader world.

That played out for me a few weeks ago as I watched a documentary called *Out of Order*. It involved the testimony of 5 candidates for ordination in the PCUSA. Now these folks were either gay, lesbian or trans – orientations which at that time prohibited their ordination in the Presbyterian Church. Thankfully that ruling has been reversed and we now share the same theological and ecclesial understandings as you in the UCC do. But the great and pervasive concern back then (and sadly still in some places today) was that somehow their sexuality would pervert the purity of the church. Yet the 5 candidates and others persisted, against great odds and in spite of vote after vote which denied their sense of call. Their answer to the fear that surrounds sexuality was to say – *look at us. We are the answer to your fear*. Look at us, at our lives, at our faith, at our willingness to serve, our humility and our gifts – really see us, see what God sees in us, and then consider if you have to fear us.

What are today's fears and how are they being promoted? On a national level, there are many – they look like racism; fear of the other, be it immigrants or Muslims; the loss of our national identity as white and Christian. They translate into Islamophobia or ultra-nationalism, white supremacy, immigrant scapegoating, neo-Nazism. Consider the comment of our new Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly. *Make no mistake about it. We are in fact a nation under attack! Under attack!* Now I ask you, what is the easiest, quickest, response to that proclamation – true or not true. I suggest it is likely to be *fear* and all that that unhealthy, paranoid, un-life-promoting kind of reaction can bring. Certainly to the degree that that is true, and we do face threats from within and outside our borders, we must evaluate such threats and take measures against extremist groups and criminals, but not at the cost of trading our fundamental freedoms and principles and our beliefs for a sense of security. To exist in a state of fear is not life-giving, and who wants to be barricaded in our rooms with doors locked. There's too much good wonderful stuff available outside self-imposed barriers. Remember that Jesus said over and over again, *Be not afraid and Fear not*. And the Apostle Paul said that *perfect love casts out fear*. It's basically not a good strong place to operate out of.

So where might you and I say we are the answer to unfounded or exaggerated fears? Lest that seem like too imposing a task for ordinary folks like us or an ordinary congregation like ours, consider a couple of stories which might give us inspiration and courage to resist. On April 15<sup>th</sup> the Little River United Church of Christ in Annadale, VA was spray-painted with anti-LGBTQ, anti-Muslim messages and swastikas. In the same week, during Passover, the Jewish Community Center of Northern VA, just a mile down the road, was the target of anti-Semitic graffiti. What did both congregations do – lock the doors, go into hiding, cancel services, urge caution? No, they held a joint prayer vigil to which hundreds came “to recognize the hatred that was here and move through that, and through these wounds begin to move forward.” And

walls and windows of both congregations were washed clean and cries of hate were drowned out as people of faith (and no faith) proclaimed *We are the answer to hate*.

A lot closer to home, perhaps you have heard about the two Branford teachers, Joel Hinrichs and Peter Bouley, who traveled last summer through 4 countries to try to understand the complicated Syrian Refugee Crisis and bring insights and information back home to their students and our community. An antidote to fear is learning, encountering, seeing for yourself rather than just ingesting the prevailing wisdom or nonsense, daring to speak a contrary word.

Even closer, from within these FCC walls, hospitality, support, transportation, room and board were the answer to the needs of two refugee families to have security and safety. And in spite of the current efforts to curtail immigration – remember, *We are under attack!* – we are looking to host another family in our midst. That's our response to xenophobia.

Some churches have become sanctuary churches offering safety to folks at risk. Some cities, like New Haven, have become sanctuary cities. Some girls like Malala in Pakistan went to school, resisting fundamentalists' ban on educating women – at almost the cost of her life. Folks of many different colors crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma Alabama in 1965 to give their answer to the fear of racial integration. Thousands still stand and march against discrimination and oppression. These and actions like these may not have universal acceptance, but they do represent bringing a positive answer to fear, and our responsibility, our privilege, our mandate to do so – on big matters or little ones, on the national scene or the local one, on public issues or private ones, in this church and the Church and all houses of faith – wherever people get locked into unfree places due to their fears.

On a spiritual level, when we are afraid, we don't know how to access our own souls, to move toward prayer, to exercise our better instincts, to be our best selves created in God's image. How can we, like the psalmist, claim that God is our *chosen portion and our cup... [who] shows us the path of life in whose presence there is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore?* How can we ask what is the life and work God is giving me now – particularly in the face of the many fears which circulate all around us sending us into hiding places, seeking safety in the midst of real or imagined danger?

Paradoxically, the answer to that question is first to be quiet. Before we give into fear or resist too readily, almost on auto-pilot, signing petitions, creating protest posters – we need to rest with God. To listen to the One who listens to us. It could be an apocryphal story but it is a good one. When Mother Theresa was asked what she said to God when she prayed, she replied, "Mostly I just listen." And when asked what God said to her, "Mostly he just listens." Surely in this holy listening, you will find guidance for moving through fear into a faithful answering, a faithful resistance. And you will move from working for results to allowing yourself to be used by God's love. Moved from a hope in *what I can do...* to *what is God doing and how can I fit in, support, participate?*

Think back on those fearful disciples, and even Thomas with his doubts, and when they recognized Jesus in their midst, being with them, empowering them, filling them with the Spirit. Think about what they accomplished as their answer to the persecutions and opposition they

faced. Where would we be without their witness, their resistance? What might we be able to do when we believe that Jesus calling us onward and accompanies us in our efforts – when we trust that even if we can't see him in the flesh.

In silence, in rest, in waiting, in prayer and contemplation, we may come to know that there is a place for us to fill, an answer for us to give that is bigger and deeper than that which our own little voice raises, but comes forth from the heart of God. Remember this, trust this truth: *Wherever there is victory or joy or wonder or resurrection, there is Christ calling you to follow him out of death or whatever entombs you into his larger and more glorious life* (Br. James Koester)

May it be so. Amen and amen.

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess, First Congregational Church in Branford, 23 April, 2017.

Insights and Quotations from:

*Faithful Resistance* by Rick Ufford-Chase (Middletown, DE; Unshelved, 2016)

*Naked Spirituality* by Brain D. McLaren (New York; Harper Collins, 2011)

*Wondrous Encounters* by Richard Rohr (Cincinnati, OH; St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011)