

Sermon by Sarah Hoch: Easter II
April 24, 2022
“There’s a war in Ukraine. How can this be Easter?”
Trinity Episcopal Church

Ukraine has been weighing heavily on my mind and my heart this Easter season. Ukrainians are overwhelmingly Eastern Orthodox Christians, with a long-standing relationship to the Moscow patriarchate—Russia is also overwhelmingly Orthodox in its Christianity, and historically has seen itself as the “Third Rome.” The war has been happening during Orthodox Lent; this latest Russian offensive kicked off during their Holy Week. We’re hearing terrible stories, and seeing scenes—photos and also video—out of Ukraine that are very difficult, traumatic.

Today is Orthodox Easter.

What do we make of that? Of celebrating hope and triumph over death in the middle of a brutal, unprovoked, atrocity-laden war? What does that mean? How can this be Easter?

Our gospel today opens with the disciples locked in a room, afraid. We’re told that the source of their fear is “the Jews,” which I’d like to emphasize does not mean “people who are Jewish” – indeed, the disciples are Jewish – but rather “religious authorities who are collaborating with the Roman state.” These are the authorities who, along with their political sympathizers, had Jesus arrested and handed over to Pilate, and demanded his crucifixion.

There are many kinds of fear in the world. Fear of for one’s physical safety, yes, but also: fear of shame, of being embarrassed, of looking like a fool. There is fear of loss, and of loss of standing in the community. Fear of being irrelevant. Fear of letting others down, or of being of seen and found wanting. There is fear of scarcity, of not having enough. And there is fear of change, of losing that which is important to us, that which orders our being and existence and sense of place in the world. Fear of losing our security.

None of these fears I’ve listed are new. None of them are unique to our era, to our communities, or to us.

The authorities John mentions here were, I think, afraid in a number of these ways. They were afraid of Roman reprisal if the Jewish people—Israel—was too politically active against Rome. Maybe they were afraid of losing their status in the community, of being irrelevant. Maybe of other things, too; it was not a terribly happy time. And in their fear, those authorities sought to destroy something that was making them afraid: the teaching and person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The disciples were afraid fairly regularly in the gospels despite having Jesus right physically there. Paul was afraid, as we’ll hear in Acts this season, and he spoke about fear in his letters to the churches. I’d wager that you’ve felt many of these fears yourself, and have seen others in your family or community react to these fears.

The reaction to fear can feel bad, or it can feel like vicious satisfaction as you swat the persistent fly that is the thing causing you to feel fear, or which represents the thing you fear. You hit it, you agitate in the background against it, you slander it, you verbally unleash on it and cut it down. You fight it, because it feels like running away from it is the only alternative.

But here's a thing about Easter, and about fear. Jesus, before going to the cross, was clearly afraid, asking God to remove this cup if at all possible. But he accepted the cup in the end, moving beyond his own fear. He let Judas kiss him. He neither fought nor ran. He embraced it, somehow, and went through it. And of course we know that wasn't the end, for Jesus: that was the big story of last Sunday!

And in our story today, the second Sunday in Easter for Western Christians, the disciples are have locked themselves in, out of fear, and despite this "Jesus came and stood among them" as if those locks weren't there, his wounds a visible sign that he had every reason to be afraid. But he comes saying "peace be with you."

Thomas famously and relateably is not on board until he's directly invited to experience Jesus' invitation to peace. But, together, the disciples remember that peace that passes all understanding. Jesus' continuous invitation earlier in the gospel "abide in me, as I abide in you," and by the end of the Gospel, they've left the locked house and are on the beach... and I would wager their fear was still present. But maybe, after their encounter with the Risen Christ, who somehow Lives despite carrying his wounds, they've embraced it, able to do what they need to do: which is to live.

We may hear, "be not afraid" over and over in the Bible, but we don't hear "there is no reason to be afraid." There are tons of reasons to be afraid in this life!

But despite that inevitable fear, the Easter story shows us that Jesus shows up among us, where we have locked ourselves away as best we can, and says, peace be with you. Fear will not have the last word in your life, or the life of your community. Jesus opens for us and invites us into a way, truth, and life that is bigger than our fears, bigger than the situation we're in and our fight-or-flight reaction to it, and Jesus is there in it with us. Even if we're Barabbas, being nailed to a cross, or Peter in Rome, experiencing the same fate, or any number of the barbaric tragedies and minor, non-fatal deaths that we children of God experience in this lifetime. We profess Christ crucified, and it does sound like madness, but Christ took on this humanity that we all live and loved it, and promises to be with us in it: with us, behind us, below us, above us, and within us. Not to make those terrible things okay (they are not okay, to be clear), but to be for us that Life which is greater than and beyond our suffering, able to hold it and hold us in the midst of it.

One of the most striking images out of the early days of the war, one which has stuck with me, was the image of a group of people underground in what might have been a bomb shelter or might have been a storage cellar—I'm not sure. The ceiling is low and the walls are a mess and it's dark and uncomfortable looking. There's a priest in his vestments hunched over a makeshift altar, saying the divine liturgy, as people stand around together praying in the candle light as the bombs drop above them.

The people are standing around in the candle light, locked in an underground room with threats all around, saying the divine liturgy together. It absolutely broke my heart to see it (it made me cry, actually), and it amazed me at the same time. This is a stubborn faith, a refusal to just accept that the locked room is all there is or to acquiesce to the darkness.

This is Easter faith. This is incarnational faith. This is trust that God is with us, even in the darkness.

It is notable to me, especially this week, that Jesus never promises us physical safety or financial solvency or freedom from fear. There is no “prosperity gospel.” We might get covid, get cancer, lose a loved one, be the victim of a war or a famine or the actions of an unjust state or other disaster that is not our fault, which is not okay and cannot be made okay.

What God does offer us is a way, truth, and life that goes beyond that circumstance, that provides a path beyond simply giving into those fears and acting out of them. We aren’t told it will be easy. But we are told that God is with us, and that fear and its fruits will not have the last word.