

Get a Grip!
On Fear
October 18, 2020

Good morning everyone.

Whether you're onsite or online, I'm glad that you're a part of what we're doing in this hour.

And, even more than that, I sincerely hope and pray that what I say in the next 30 minutes or so will be of great encouragement to you because, quite frankly, many of us need to be encouraged.

As I've said each week, these are extremely challenging times and the pressure pushing down on us – the *stress* we feel from what's happening both publicly and personally – is straining us and squeezing us.

And last week we talked about the three

options we have for dealing with that stress, which are to ...

- Get out from under it
- Get stronger so that we can better “bear up” and be more resilient.
- And/or get filled with something better than what’s coming out of most of us ... which is a whole host of emotions and attitudes that none of us really want to characterize our lives.

And today, we’re going to talk specifically about one of those emotions – fear – but before we get into I want to challenge you that if you were not here or watching online last week to go the media section of our website or our app and watch, listen to or read the message ...

... because those three options (get out, get stronger, get filled) are the foundation of everything else we're talking about in this series.

So, let's talk about *fear*.

And I suppose that at the very beginning I should probably say that some level fear is a good thing. I mean ...

- It makes sense to be afraid to walk across 152 Hwy in the middle of the day.
- It makes sense to be afraid that you'll lose your job if you don't do it and do it well.
- If you don't get into better shape, it makes sense to fear that you'll shorten your time on this earth.

- If you've never given a thought to knowing God, it makes sense to fear what's going to happen after you die.

A healthy sense of fear is a sign of wisdom and humility; an understanding of how life works and the fact that we are not God.

But an unhealthy sense of fear that ...

- Keeps us up at night worrying about an endless list of "what ifs" ...
- Or prevents us from engaging with others even when all appropriate precautions are taken ...
- Or leads us to micromanage every step our children take so that they never experience failure or the consequences of foolish decisions ...

- Or keeps us – if we're Christians – from fulfilling Jesus' call to be salt and light in a dark and senseless world.

An unhealthy sense of fear is damaging and destructive to us and to everyone around us.

And it's not who we are meant to be as those created to reflect the image of God. We're made for more than that.

Unfortunately, almost everything we see and hear in the media these days is designed to raise our fears because fear sells. If it bleeds, it leads.

That's why, even though the subject changes, the headlines are all the same.

- If Trump wins, more people will die, and life as we know it will end!

- If Biden wins, more people will die, and life as we know it will end!
- If we don't get the economy going again, more people will die, and life as we know it will end!
- If we don't clamp down on COVID spread, more people will die, and life as we know it will end!
- If <fill in the blank> happens, more people will die and life as we know it will end!

So, we need to get a grip on fear because fear has too many of us in its grip.

Jesus on Fearⁱ

Now, what's so fascinating to me – and I hope to make it fascinating to you – is that Jesus

often talked about fear.

In fact, one of the things Jesus did with his 12 apostles was to lead them through experiences that would reinforce what He taught about fear.

And He had to do that because His bottom-line concerning fear was, let's just say, a little cryptic and maybe even naïve.

The bottom line for them, and for those of us who are His followers today, was and is ...

“Fear not.”

“Fear not. Don't be afraid. Stop allowing yourself to be dominated and ruled by fear. Get a grip on your fear instead of being gripped by your fear. Fear not.”

... which, of course, is easy to say, but very

hard to do.

... which is why Jesus did some “field training” on fear with His 12 apostles.

For example, right after Jesus chooses the Twelve ...

By the way, if you’re new to Christianity you need to know that ...

- Everywhere Jesus went there was a *crowd* who wanted to *hear* what He said ...
- But within that crowd there was a smaller group called *disciples* who wanted to *do* what He said ...
- And within the disciples, there were the apostles, the 12 men that Jesus chose specifically to eventually *lead* his

mission and *teach* others what He said.

Anyway, right after Jesus chooses the Twelve, He calls them together and He says, "Let me tell you what's going to happen. Here's the big picture, here's the whole narrative."

*"I am sending you out as
sheep among wolves."
Matthew 10:16 (NLT)*

Now to us, that's just a figure of speech.

But in that day and age, they had seen that this kind of thing does not end well. When you send the sheep out among the wolves, it's a bloody, gory mess!

So, Jesus was saying, "Now that you've signed on, let me tell you what's going to happen. I'm going to send you out like sheep among wolves, and you're going to be arrested and you're going to be beaten."

And then he says, "But don't worry. Don't be afraid. Hang in there to the end. Fear not."ⁱⁱ

And they're looking at each other like, "Did we miss part of the sales pitch? I mean, is there anything between 'you're going to send us out' and 'we're going to be arrested and beaten'?"

And, eventually, they were sent out and eventually they were all arrested. And eventually, they were all beaten, and many of them were executed.

But Jesus saying at the end of that, "don't worry and hang in there"? Not only did it *not* take away their fear, it doesn't even make sense.

A Field Trip

So, Jesus – and this is the part we don't connect between what Jesus said and what Jesus did – Jesus took them on a field trip to teach them a lesson about fear.

Matthew tells us that ...

Jesus got into a boat and his disciples followed him ...

... because they're his followers. He gets in the boat; they do what He did. Jesus is in the boat, they get in the boat, too.

As they row out to the middle of the Sea of Galilee (which is more like a huge lake; it's eight miles across) ...

Matthew writes that ...

Suddenly a furious storm

came up on the lake ...

... which was not unusual for the Sea of Galilee. This kind of thing happens fairly often there.

But this particular storm was so intense ...

... that the waves swept over the boat. Matthew 8:24 (NIV)

... which was very dangerous because this isn't a very large boat that they're in.

So, the boat is rocking, wind is howling, they can't see land in either direction because the rain is coming down sideways and they're soaking wet.

And it's loud. Some of you have been out on a boat in a storm and you know that to talk to someone, you've got to get right up in their face, or you have to yell.

And then Matthew says – and Peter would come along later and say, “Yep, this is exactly how it happened” ...

Matthew says ...

*But Jesus was sleeping.
Matthew 8:24 (NIV)*

Jesus was sleeping, which is almost impossible to believe. I wonder if maybe He was faking, and they just *thought* He was sleeping. I mean, how do you sleep through something like this?

Anyway ... Jesus is laying down, soaking wet probably. And as this roaring wind and all of this storm is going on ...

*The disciples went and woke
him ...*

But they didn't wake him up like, "Jesus." You know how you gently wake up your children?

It wasn't like that at all. It was *loud* like the storm.

They were *yelling*. You can't be heard on this boat unless you're yelling.

Everyone was yelling ...

*... saying, "Lord, save us!
We're going to drown!"
Matthew 8:25 (NIV)*

"Jesus! Wake up!"

And Jesus sits up.

And He says just as loudly,

*He replied, "You of little faith
..."*

And they're like, "What?!"

"You of little faith!"

"Jesus, there's hair in our *face*!"

"No! You of little faith! You of little *faith*!"

And then here's this ridiculous question.

No one would make this up.

"Why are you so afraid?"

"What?!"

"Why are you so afraid?!"

"We're afraid because a furious storm just came up and the boat is sinking, and we might drown! And when you might drown, you're afraid!"

“What a silly question! That’s why we are afraid!”

And look what it says, this is the best part.

*Then he got up and rebuked
the winds and the waves.*

He spoke to them.

*And it was completely calm.
Matthew 8:26 (NIV)*

Now, some biblical scholars and interpreters have said that the point of this story is to demonstrate that Jesus had power over nature which meant that He truly was God in the flesh.

And think that’s a reasonable conclusion. I mean, as soon as Jesus started talking, the storm stopped.

But I think what happens *next* is the real takeaway of this whole incident.

Matthew writes:

The men were amazed ...

Of course, they were. You would be, too.

And they asked the perfect question.

In fact, this is the most important question anyone can ever ask, especially if you're not a believer or a church person.

The question isn't ...

- Does God exist?
- Or how did God create the world – was it six literal days or millions of years of evolution?

- Or how big is the universe?

Those are interesting things to talk about, but they aren't THE question.

This is the question.

*"What kind of man is this?
Even the winds and the waves
obey him!" Matthew 8:27
(NIV)*

The question always, always, always is who is Jesus?

And we don't have time to go into it today but there's no doubt that He really did exist. Even atheistic scholars have concluded in recent years that there was a person Jesus of Nazareth.

The question is ... who is He?

Anyway ... back to the field trip ... which is *also* recorded in Mark's Gospel ... which came from the Apostle Peter.

In other words, Peter told Mark about his time with Jesus, and Mark wrote it down.

And when Peter told Mark *this* particular story, it's interesting how Mark described the reaction of the men in the boat.

Instead of saying "they were amazed" like Matthew did ...

He said ...

"They feared a great fear."

Mark 4:41 (DLNT)

He used the same Greek word twice in the sentence as if Peter had told him, "We were

afraid, and then we were *really* afraid. We were afraid of the storm and then we realized who we were in the boat with, and then we feared a great fear.”

This is so important for somebody here today or watching or listening.

Their latter fear was greater than their former fear.

Their fear of what they had just seen Jesus do ... their fear of whose presence they were in ... was *greater* than the fear they had experienced in the storm and for a fleeting moment, this is so important, and ...

For a fleeting moment, their focus on Jesus overwhelmed their fear.

Standing there in the boat, their focus on Jesus and confidence in what Jesus was capable of, overwhelmed everything else.

In other words, the lesson that Jesus was trying to teach them was simply that ...

You do not have to allow fear to overwhelm you because there's something – someone – more overwhelming.

You don't have to allow fear to control your life because there's someone more capable and more powerful than fear.

Another Lesson

Now, a few days later, while this experience was still fresh on their minds, Jesus says, "Okay, let's talk about this. We had a field trip. It did not go so well. Everybody failed.

"But while it's still fresh, let me give you another way to think about it."

And here's what He says to them.

"Do not be afraid ..."

They were like, "Yes, we heard that, we got that."

*Do not be afraid of those who
kill the body but cannot kill the
soul." Matthew 10:28 (NIV)*

"Don't let anything that can kill your body – whether it's a person, or an accident or a virus – cause you to live in the grip of fear. Don't be afraid of people or things that threaten your body but cannot kill your soul."

Why would Jesus say that?

It's because there is more to you than meets the eye. There's more to you than your body. There's a "you" that goes beyond the "you" you can see. There's a "you" that you can't

see.

So, if you're going fear something, Jesus continued ...

*Rather, be afraid of the One
who can destroy [THAT] ...*

*... the One who can destroy
both soul and body in hell.*

Matthew 10:28 (NIV)

Now, in order to understand what Jesus is saying, you need to understand that what He is doing here is called *hyperbole*. It's where you say something extreme not to be literal but to make a point even stronger by contrast.

And the point Jesus is making is exactly what happened on the boat.

"Guys, remember, you were focused on the wrong thing. Your focus was on the storm and so you were controlled by the fear of what it

could do to your physical body.”

“But when it was all over, you realized there was something greater than the storm and your focus should have been on that.”

“So, if you’re going to be afraid of something, be afraid of God – not of anything that can kill your physical body.”

Now, if Jesus would have stopped right here, it would be easy to miss the hyperbole and get the impression that He was telling them – and us, “so, be afraid of God. Be very afraid because He is so great and holy, and you are so small and sinful.”

But that’s not what He was communicating *at all* because ...

The very next thing He says is ...

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?"

To which the guys would have said, "yes, of course. Everybody knows that."

And then Jesus says ...

"Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care." Matthew 10:29 (NIV)

"The fate of these little creatures – which are basically worthless to you – matters greatly to God. He cares even about them."

"But, let's not talk about sparrows. Let's talk about you for a minute."

When it comes to you guys ...

"Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered so ... <here it is again> ... "don't be afraid."

Why?

*"Because you are worth more than many sparrows."
Matthew 10:30-31 (NIV)*

Worth more to who? To God.

And what Jesus is saying through this hyperbole is "listen guys. If you really *must* fear something, then it ought to be God, right? He rules over body and soul."

"And yet, you matter so incredibly much to him – He knows your name, He knows your circumstances, He is concerned about your personal life, He loves you so much ... that there is *no reason to fear Him!*"

- Therefore, regardless of what happens in your life or to your body, you are ultimately as safe and secure as you could possibly be.
- Therefore, when you come up against situations where fear wants to control you, remember that. Be guided by the love and concern God has for you. Let that – and Him – be your focus.

And I think some of us need to spend time pondering this truth especially because as I said earlier, we are being bombarded with so much fear because fear sells. And it's working.

And I'm not saying we should be foolish or stupid about how we live or what we think.

But if the greatest force in the Universe – a God who could wipe us out in an instant and

destroy both body and soul ...

If the greatest force in the Universe chooses instead to love us and care for us down to the level of the minutest detail of our lives ...

- What does that mean concerning how we think and act and respond to coronavirus?
- What does that mean as we think and act and respond in this upcoming election?
- What does that mean as we consider the future – our finances and our job and our health and our kids and <whatever>?

I'm not saying I have the answer for you in any of those situations, but I *am* saying that, if you're a Christian, *you need to ask those questions and then be guided by the answer.*

And it might mean you keep doing exactly what you're doing but it you do it not out of fear but out of confidence in God's love.

Or as one of Jesus' friends, the Apostle John, once put it:

*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.
1 John 4:18 (NIV)*

Another Field Trip

Now, you would think that with the first field trip plus this teaching that the guys would have it clear in their heads and in their hearts.

So, Jesus decides to find out.

They're out in the middle of nowhere. Jesus has preached too long and the sun is starting to go down. And people are hungry

So, one of the disciples comes to Jesus and says, "We need to send these folks home, they're gonna starve, they've been out here all day and you went a little long with your message."

And Jesus responds, "Hey, I got an idea, you feed them."

"Are you kidding? You know how much money that would cost? In fact, there's not even enough food in this region to feed all these people."

Then – and you know the story – they find a kid with five loaves and two fishes and Jesus prays over what he has.

And then Matthew tells us, "Guys, I was there. Jesus literally broke up the little boy's lunch and split it up between us 12 and said, 'Okay,

feed them.”

“And I don’t know how to say it in any other way, but we performed a miracle. It was amazing! We actually started distributing this food and then all these people were fed, and it was like, ‘Oh, my goodness.’”

And now it’s time for the field trip.

Matthew writes ...

Immediately ...

... as in, as soon as it dawned on everybody what had happened ...

Immediately, Jesus made the disciples (the 12) get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.

Matthew 14:22 (NIV)

Now, the word translated “made” is a really interesting little Greek word. It means he coerced them, He forced them.

“You all get into the boat.”

Now, why did Jesus have to do that?

Because they remember *the last boat ride*.

“No, Jesus, I don’t think we’re getting in any more boats with you. We’ll just walk around the lake this time.”

“We’re good, Jesus. We fear not, but we’re smarter than that. We’re not gonna get in the boat.”

But the text says Jesus forced them to get in. But He didn’t go with them this time. Instead, He went up on the mountain to pray (and we talked about why He did that last week) and

tells them He'll catch up to them on the other side.

So, they start rowing over to where he's supposed to meet them. The sun goes down, next thing you know, hours and hours have gone by and they are stuck in the middle of the sea of Galilee, because they're rowing into a headwind.

And then ...

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. Matthew 14:25 (NIV)

Now, if you're not a Christian or used to be, this is where you think "okay, Jesus calming the storm? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe the storm was just over."

"But now you're going tell me I have to believe

that Jesus walked on water? This is why I can't be a Christian."

So, let me say something about this real quick. Christians don't believe Jesus walked on the water because the Bible tells us so. It is way better than that.

- Matthew who was there, told us so.
- Mark who got his story from Peter who was there, told us so.
- And John, who was with Jesus throughout his ministry, from the days of the Jordan River, all the way through the Crucifixion, resurrection, he was there, and he told us so.

All three were eyewitnesses, and all three wrote about it. "Look, I'm telling you, this is what happened."

And by the way, not only do they tell us what happened, they also tell us something else. As we'll see, they tell us their embarrassing response to what happened.

And here's why that's important.

One way that historians gauge the authenticity of an ancient writing is by using what's called "the criteria of embarrassment."ⁱⁱⁱ

The criteria of embarrassment goes like this: If somebody is writing a story about themselves – especially if they are a revered or respected person (like an apostle) – they are not going to invent stories that make themselves look bad.

So, if there is an account in a story that makes the person who is revered look bad, it's

probably authentic because no one would have made that up. And not only would they not have made it up, if it was true, they would probably have left it out.

Now, when the gospel stories began circulating, the men who were in the boat that night were still alive. Within the Christian community, they were like rock stars.

- John, who was with Jesus.
- Peter who was with Jesus.
- Matthew the famous tax collector.

I mean these guys were THE guys.

So, in communicating the story, in writing the story, they most likely would have left out any embarrassing details. But, as we'll see, they didn't.

So, here's what happened. Here's what we're

told because here's what happened.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. Matthew 14:25 (NIV)

And ...

When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified.

"It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

Matthew 14:26 (NIV)

Really Matthew? Again?

"Yeah, I was there. We all freaked out just like last time."

Peter you spent your whole life on the water!

"I know, I know, it's so embarrassing. But you

gotta put it in there, Mark, because that's what happened".

And then Jesus says what He has said so many times before.

Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Matthew 14:27 (NIV)

Fear not.

Changing the World

Now, here's what's amazing. *Even that experience didn't stick.* They all feared right up till the very end.

At the end of Jesus's ministry, He's on his way to Jerusalem and when they arrive, they're welcomed by the crowds chanting his name.

And people lay down palm branches in front of Him as he rides in on a colt of a donkey, which is about as public of a declaration of “I’m the Messiah” that you can get.

And they’re all thinking, “This is it. This is the moment we’ve been waiting for.”

This was the moment their parents had told them might happen one day, but they didn’t dream that it would happen in *their* lifetime; that the Messiah, God’s Messiah, would show up and re-establish the nation of Israel and the kingdom and throw the Romans out.

But things do not go according to script – at least as they understood it, because later that week, Jesus is arrested.

Then he is dragged to Golgotha and crucified.

And they are afraid. They panic. They hide, they lie, they deny.

“We don’t know who He was. I mean, we *thought* we did. But it’s over.”

“And we can’t keep this dream alive. We can’t tell these stories because nobody will take them seriously because no one can take Jesus seriously.

“Remember, on the boat that day when we said, ‘What kind of man is this?’ and we were convinced that this was a man that had to be from God? But clearly, Rome, can’t crucify God’s Messiah.”

“So, we were wrong. Everything about him, everything we believed was wrong. Everything he said about himself either we misunderstood, or he lied.”

And with that, it should have all ended. You and I shouldn't even be here today or watching online.

But it didn't and we are because on the first Easter Sunday, they looked into an empty tomb.

And then they met their living friend who had risen from the dead.

And suddenly, for the first time, it all made perfect sense, especially what Jesus had to say about fear.

Even though the world would continue to be a very scary place for them (just as Jesus had promised them at the beginning), they didn't have to be driven by their fear ...

... because the resurrection validated the "field trips" and Jesus teaching of "Fear not,

Fear not, I am with you”.

And that’s what they did.

They “feared not” and they came out of hiding!

They willingly faced down the very men that had had Jesus arrested, beaten, and crucified.

And then they went on to change the world because fear no longer had a grip on them. They had a grip on fear.

“Fear not” is what changed the world.

A generation of men and women, the first generation of Christians lost their fear of death, and when someone has lost their fear of death, it is very difficult to stop them.

Back in the days of the Roman Empire, it was

illegal for doctors to examine dead bodies. Once someone died, you had to bury their body immediately. You couldn't do autopsies. It was illegal to open up a dead body to learn anything about how the body worked.

So, doctors and researchers would wait on the sidelines of an arena until the gladiatorial games were over and the animals were taken out. Then they would go out and examine the bodies of people who lay dying.

During the reign of Marcus Aurelius (in the second century), a medical writer by the name of Claudius Galenus was assigned to that task at the arena in Rome.

Here's what he wrote about the Christians he examined. Here's what he observed in them as they were taking their final breath.

“Fearlessness of death and the hereafter is something we witness in them every day.”

Wow. Can you even imagine what that kind of courage would be like?

Why were they like that?

Because when you worship a risen Lord, when you worship someone who has mastered life and conquered death in His literal resurrection ...

... and He says to you, “Fear not” ...

... you realize “I CAN fear not.”

And not because there’s nothing to be afraid of but because I have focused my attention on the One who deserves all my trust and all my reverence; on the One who knows and loves me down to the smallest detail of my life.

He is greater than anything or anyone that might try to harm me.

- This is why, friends, we are not called the Church of Chicken Little but the Church of Jesus Christ.
- This is why, regardless of what happens in our world, our calling isn't to run around screaming that "the sky is falling."
- This is why there is no panic in heaven and why Jesus has no sweaty armpits as he surveys our world.

For over the chaos of this world reigns the King of kings, Jesus the Resurrected, before whom every knee will eventually bow.

- So, if Trump wins, fear not.

- If Biden wins, fear not.
- If the economy doesn't get going again, fear not.
- If we don't clamp down on COVID spread, fear not.
- If <fill in the blank> happens, fear not.

Because regardless of

- What politicians do or don't do ...
- And what the economy does and or doesn't do ...
- And what science does or doesn't do ...
- Or anything else ...

... Jesus is risen, and his kingdom is

everlasting.^{iv}

Conclusion

So, as we close this morning, I want to give you the opportunity to think about whatever it is you're afraid of right now.

Maybe it's some of the things I've mentioned. Maybe it's something else altogether.

Maybe it's an issue you see in our country or our world. Maybe it's something intensely personal.

Whatever it is, I want you to get a mental image of it in your mind. I'll just be quiet for a minute while you do that.

Now, I want you to imagine Jesus standing next to you saying, "fear not."

Now, imagine him opening His hands to you and you taking that burden, that care, that worry, that fear and giving it over to him.

Jesus we thank you that this is more than just a mind game. We thank you that this is really how it works because you have conquered our greatest fear – our fear of death – in your resurrection.

Help us to trust in the evidence we see of your love for us and, in those times when we can't see it, help us to trust in your victory over the grave.

Amen.

1. Next week ... Get a Grip on Anger

Endnotes

ⁱ Credit for the following sections go to Andy Stanley and his message *Fear* in the series *You're Not the Boss of Me*. I have drawn a slightly different conclusion from Jesus' use of hyperbole in Matthew 10.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 10:19-22

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://credohouse.org/blog/why-the-gospels-are-embarrassing>

^{iv} Adapted from <https://www.1517.org/articles/2020-is-a-great-year-for-the-church> with my added examples.