

My family and I are two years out from one of the most terrifying episodes of our lives. My wife, Martha, and I began to notice evidence that we weren't the only ones who had been in our house. And the more we looked, the more evidence we saw. On the second night after noticing this I had to get up and go to the kitchen, and when I walked into our living room my worst fears were realized. There, on our fireplace, stood the biggest, nastiest, hairiest...rat I've ever seen. We had a four-second staring contest and then it scampered away. Needless to say, I didn't sleep that night. My mind ran wild as I thought of all the things that thing might be doing, and I was convinced it was about to sneak in my room, jump into my bed and make my life miserable. I don't know why I was scared. I outweighed it by about 230 lbs and could probably take it in a fistfight. But I was creeped out as I pictured it creeping around my house.

So the next day, I wasn't all that pleasant to be around. But we set traps, suffered through another sleepless night, and were awoken the next morning by the *snap* of victory. I was set free. At least I thought I was. You see, I walked into my office where we had set another trap and, to my horror, I discovered that one worked too. Suddenly, the peace that came with the victory over one rat became the fear that went something like this: "If there are two, there could be three, or four, or five...or maybe they had babies!" It never dawned on me that there could be more than one. My fear wasn't necessarily about the rats anymore. It was about the unknown. The next few nights were, to say the least, fitful. Every sound I heard had the potential of being a cousin or uncle or junior out for revenge. Ultimately, though, I grew in faith that the problem was gone, and returned to a pattern of peaceful nights. Now, Martha would like me to let you know that we keep a clean house and this story, in no way, should make you think otherwise.

That story is a lighthearted way to introduce something serious we as a church have to talk about. And that is fear. Our culture is soaking in it right now. You don't have to watch much TV to hear about it. A quick scan online shows us stories of fear: "Christianity Facing Elimination By Isis Apocalypse", "Guns top Americans' Christmas lists", "New York has credible threat days before Christmas", "Giant Comets Could Pose Danger To Life On Earth", "Border wide open", "Two Years to Save the Earth", "Hillary Is Going to Ruin The Country", "Trump Is Going to Ruin The Country" "Reprint of Hitler's Mein Kampf unleashes row in Germany", we have war in the Middle East, a war on women, a war on men, a war on Christmas, and maybe the most terrifying of all, "By age 2, most kids can navigate a touch screen." And the place that's supposed to have an answer to all of this, the Gospel message of love and peace and hope, risks being contaminated by this insidious force called fear. We have to address this.

Fear is not necessarily a sin. All of us have our fears. Some are small and inconsequential, like rats. Some are more profound. In fact, fear can be a showcase for faith and the very thing that drives you into the loving arms of Jesus. But Paul commands us to take every thought captive to Christ, so it's what we do with fear

that's at issue. Uncontrolled fear is a threat to our discipleship and witness. It makes us keep quiet about our faith. Fear of wicked and violent people tempts us to hole up and ignore the needs of desperate people. It fuels an us vs. them mentality. Fear causes us to attempt to control all circumstances and contingencies. Fear leads us to escape into alcohol or drugs. Fear keeps us from putting ourselves out there lest we fail or get hurt. Fear keeps us from admitting our marriage is in trouble and needs help. Fear keeps us from having that tough conversation, or preaching that tough sermon. **And fear competes with faith for our devotion to Christ.**

Fear isn't a new thing. Throughout our study of Mark we've seen the interplay of faith and fear. The last few weeks we've seen fear run rampant and control the players in the story. The Pharisees, threatened by Jesus, fear losing their position in society, and conspire to kill an innocent man. Pilate fears an uprising of the people and executes that innocent man. The disciples flee in fear when Jesus is arrested and their worst fears come true as Jesus is arrested, humiliated, and crucified. And so Mark, whose Gospel is all about how to follow Jesus, gives us two last stories wrought with fear. One is handled in faith. One is not. And he concludes his Gospel with a bit of a cliffhanger that has great implications for us. And as we go through this last passage, I want you to consider where your fears lie and how you manage them when they show up. Because Mark has a prescription for us that we have to get if we're going to be able to engage people with the Gospel when they show up in fear.

[Mark 15:42-46 ESV] ⁴² And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. ⁴⁵ And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. ⁴⁶ And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

As so often has happened in Mark, an outsider is the one who shows us a proper response. Remember the Garasene demoniac, Jairus, one of the rulers at the synagogue, the hemorrhaging woman, the Syrophoenician woman and the centurion. All of these people were outsiders who weren't with Jesus for three years but yet seemed to understand who he was. Joseph is one of these, but an interesting one.

Some suggest Joseph asks for Jesus' body because the Law says leaving someone hanging dead on a tree overnight defiles the land. Others suggest that he considered Jesus innocent and simply wanted to give him a proper Jewish burial. But I think there's something more, and the text gives us clues that say as much, and clues very that show us the battle between faith and fear.

Look first how Joseph is described: "who was also looking for the kingdom of God." He is a Pharisee, a devout Jew who, in faith, fully expects God to establish his Kingdom. Could it be that, by God's grace, he has recognized Jesus as the Messiah and become a disciple? Now, we could just cheat and go look at the Gospel of John where we're told that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus. But I think Mark is making us work for it a bit to introduce a point about faith and fear that he won't complete until the end of his Gospel.

John also tells us that, up to this point, he was a disciple in secret, for FEAR of the Jews. Joseph is in the middle of the battle of fear and faith and fear is winning. But Joseph knows what the Prophets have said. Ezekiel and Zechariah, among others, prophesied about a coming kingdom, Isaiah prophesied that a virgin shall conceive and give birth, and Micah says that, from Bethlehem will come one who is to be the ruler of Israel. Surely he has heard about this man from Bethlehem who began his ministry by saying, **(Mark 1:15) "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel,"** the first of many times Jesus talked of the Kingdom. Based on all of that, it would be reasonable for us to believe Joseph was a disciple of Jesus.

Consider this: Suppose I call Martha and tell her I'll be home after this meeting. She's not sure of the exact time but she trusts my character knowing that I'll do what I say. Because of that she anticipates and looks for my arrival. She hears the garage door opening and my car pulling in, signs that I'm home. And when I walk in the door and say, "Honey, I'm home!" she recognizes my voice because she has a relationship with me. Joseph knew God's Word. He knows God's character. He waited and watched with anticipation. He understood the signs of the coming Kingdom and, because he had a relationship with God, recognized the voice of God in Jesus.

And then he sees his Messiah crucified and that's all he can take. His faith, based on all that God has said in the Old Testament and Jesus has said while on earth, fuels in him the courage to directly confront his fear. And in that moment he boldly and publicly asks for Jesus body.

He had reason to be afraid. We're told he's a member of the council, the Sanhedrin, the very group that orchestrated Jesus' execution. His proclamation of loyalty to Jesus would put his position in Jewish society at risk and expose himself to some sort of retribution from them. And he's asking for and associating himself with the body of a man just executed for treason. Pilate could have just as easily assumed he

was a threat like Jesus and put him to death too. But Joseph, emboldened by faith based on all that God has said, moves towards Jesus, and he shows us that **when faith conquers fear, we are able to risk it all for the one who paid it all**. When we know God's Word, His character, and his plan, our faith expands and we are able to live boldly for him.

But what happens when the faith/fear battle isn't so decisive? Mark closes his Gospel with a final story of the struggle and instruction in how to engage it. Look starting in 15:40:

[Mark 15:40-41, 47, 16:1-8] ⁴⁰There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem... ⁴⁷Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid. ¹⁶When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." ⁸And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Now, the first thing I want you to see is that, if you have any friends who come to church on just Christmas and Easter, tell them they missed out. They could have come this past Thursday for Christmas and then again this morning for the Resurrection and they would have been done for the whole year.

This group of ladies is made up of insiders. And what Mark wants shows us is that the faith/fear battle isn't always just one or the other. It's often mixed. You see in v41 that, in faith, they were with Jesus since he began his ministry in Galilee. In faith,

they are still around. Do you know who's not? The guys! They haven't been heard from since Jesus's arrest. Mark seems to take a dig at them too by recording the women asking who will move the stone. Translation: Where are the dudes? But here are the women, faithfully seeking out Jesus. Mark commends their faithfulness by showing how they were witness to Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. He also shows their devotion to and love for Jesus in that they are going to anoint his body. In faith, they continue to move towards Jesus.

But Mark also records their struggle with fear. V40 tells us they were looking on from a distance. Who does that remind you of? Peter, in fear, follows Jesus at a distance and soon thereafter denies him three times. And these women, who began close to Jesus, start falling back because of fear. They don't deny Jesus, but fear stifles their devotion to him, and though they are given instructions by the angel, they instead flee in fear and silence (just like the other disciples). So while Joseph shows us what happens when faith conquers fear, we see here that **when fear overcomes faith, we distance ourselves from Jesus and become ineffective in our ministry**. When we are ruled by fear we cannot be effective for Christ.

Now in most of your Bibles, verses 9-20 likely have some brackets around them with an explanation that says they're not found in the earliest manuscripts and that v8 is likely the end of the Gospel. I'll spare you the technical explanations as to why. Thematically though, it makes sense. Most of us like movies that have a certain and happy ending. That's the Matthew's, Luke's, and John's Gospels that end with the Great Commission and the Ascension. Mark's entire Gospel is fast-paced, concise, him making his point and then moving along. More importantly, Mark's Gospel is full of examples of astonishment and fear and the impact those things have on people's approach to Jesus. So he ends his Gospel with the word "afraid" and a cliffhanger as to what happens next. And I think he does to give us an opportunity to take our place next to Jesus' disciples, insert ourselves into the story, and learn from the angel the answer to fear.

The first thing I want you to see is that **faith conquers fear when we focus on what Jesus said**. The angel uses the phrase "just as he told you." If fear is based on the unknown, the more we know the less we should fear. The angel is telling us that, if we fear, remember what Jesus said. Do you know who shouldn't have been surprised and afraid by Jesus' death? The disciples. Do you know who should have been heading to Galilee after three days? The disciples. Three times in the book of Mark we see Jesus giving his passion predictions, telling his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem and there he will be crucified. And he ended each of those predictions with "and after three days I will rise." And to Peter specifically he said that he would rise again and meet them in Galilee.

The angel is telling us, "If you have fear because of the unknown, focus on God's Word and what is known. Focus on his character, his work, his plan. Focus on his love for you, his perfect love for you because perfect love casts out fear." Joseph,

though fearful, relied on God's Word ("just as he told you") and took courage. The ladies, forgetting the words of Jesus, flee in fear.

So I have to ask you, what is your first instinct when you get fearful? Is it to go to people you know who will foment your fear? Is it to go to news outlets that will add to your fear? Is it to a place of isolation? Or is it to Truth, the very Word of God, and to God's people who will speak that truth to you? In John's Gospel, Jesus, who anticipated the disciples' fear, addressed this very thing, telling them, and us **"(John 16:33) ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."** Peace is found when we focus on the words of Jesus.

But it's not just what Jesus said. **Faith conquers fear when we focus on what Jesus did.** I don't know about you but, if I'm afraid, I'm going with the guy who was raised from the dead. Mark never gives us any post-resurrection appearances of Jesus but understand, if the tomb is empty, Jesus has conquered death. There is nothing more final, more hopeless than death, so if Jesus can overcome the grave, he can overcome whatever you fear. Peace is found in the empty tomb.

Jesus' resurrection is also about gracious restoration. Did you notice there's not a single word of condemnation for the disciples who have scattered in fear? In fact, it's just the opposite. Go to Galilee. There you will see him. It's directed to the disciples AND Peter. The angel isn't saying that Peter isn't a disciple. He's making a point to tell the one who had the greatest failure by denying Jesus three times that he is forgiven, accepted, and still has a purpose in Christ. This should be great news to us. Many of us, myself included, have fallen down in our devotion to Jesus. And the message here is that we have not been disqualified. Jesus goes to Galilee, where this whole thing started, telling us it's a new beginning and we are invited, no matter how we've messed up along the way. I pray that all of us would accept that invitation and join Jesus in his mission.

So what do we do with this?

Some of you walked in here this morning and the only fear you have is that you're not right with God. I want you to know that, on the Cross, Jesus paid the price to make it right, and through his resurrection he gives us new life. There's nothing you have to do. As the song said, Jesus paid it all. It is a gift. You must simply believe and accept the gift and you will have peace with God.

I also want to challenge all of us to go into 2016 committed to do a couple things: to be in the middle of God's Word and be in the middle of God's people. If the angel is telling us that we can cast out fear by knowing what Jesus said and did, we have a whole book of it right. Our church is going to be reading the entire New Testament together from mid-January to mid-March. I bet some of you haven't read the entire New Testament. Here's an awesome opportunity for you. And you know the cool

thing? While Mark finishes his Gospel with this cliffhanger of an ending and the word “afraid”, the rest of the story is much different. We’re going to see that those scattered by fear at the end of Mark are going to be emboldened by faith and through them God is going to change the whole world. Knowing what Jesus says will grow our faith. And in times of fear we can run to him to hear his words.

But we don’t want you to do this alone. We want you to do this with others. God has given us the gift of his body. We need other followers of Jesus to play the part of the angel, point to God’s Word, and say, “Just as he told you.” We need to preach the Gospel to each other in times of fear. Joseph going public with his faith in Jesus breaks ranks from all those who deny the Christ. That bridge is essentially burned. But he will find a new community very soon, one that believes Jesus is the Christ and will remind him of that constantly. All of need that in our lives too.

And, at the end of Mark, I really want to encourage some of you. It appears in Mark that those closest to him were often the ones who had the hardest time figuring it out while those who knew just a little were making proclamations of faith and truth. If you’re new to the Scriptures or new to your faith, I want you to know that you have a ministry to those of us who aren’t. I’m in a community group with a guy who’s been a believer for about a year and he’s full of the wonder of God’s Word. He’s seeing things for the first time that I’ve known for a long time and, frankly, don’t get as excited about as I should. But he does, and his enthusiasm is contagious. It’s also great to have young children and see God’s Word taking root in their hearts. My youngest, Joe, who recently came to faith in Jesus, is always coming home from church to share something with me. And when Joe wants to share something profound with you, he gets his face about two inches from yours, his eyebrows go way up, and he says things like “Dad, do you know Jesus died on the Cross for your sins and rose again?” I’ve known and believed that for decades, but there’s something glorious in his new discovery of it and something enlivening for me when I hear him speak of it.

So kids, I have an assignment for you. For the rest of Christmas break I want you to tell your parents each day that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and rose again. And when you’re back in Children or Student Ministry, I want you to come home ready to talk about the things you learned that day. They need to hear it and they need to hear it from you.

Spend time in God’s Word with God’s people. If you do those two things in 2016, I promise you will know Jesus more, your faith will grow, and your fears will diminish. But understand, I’m not encouraging you to simply make a new year’s resolution to do some religious activity. I’m calling you to live as if the Gospel is true. Because it is. The one who was dead is now alive. The one who paid the price for your sins on the cross rose from the dead to give you new life. The Suffering Servant has become the Triumphant King.

Born To Die
Rising Above Fear

Mark 15:42-16-8

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