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 John 20: 19-29
 March 30, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

Our gospel lesson this morning finds the disciples cowering behind closed doors. They – the disciples – have hidden themselves away, protected from those they didn't understand (and from the ones who didn't understand them, either). It was a terribly turbulent time. The leader of their little band had been arrested, tried, put on a cross, killed and sealed in a tomb. The disciples had to think the next step would be for the powers-that-be to round up Jesus' followers. That's the way it was done. They'd try to snuff out and finish up the unpleasant disturbance Jesus' had caused. It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus' followers were afraid to re-enter mainstream life. They hid away behind locked doors. And that's when the gospel says something quite amazing happened. Jesus freed them from their burdens so they could jump back into life – and live into their new Easter reality.

SCRIPTURE: When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

SERMON: In the summer of 2002, Amiee and I were with our children in Jackson Hole, Wyoming and I got to do something I really wanted to do. We went rafting down the Snake River. The Snake isn't the most challenging of all rivers, but it not the Cuyahoga either. It's got plenty of thrills for the amateur rafter . . . and plenty of danger, according to the outfitter who took us out that day. He told us about the rush we'd feel when we hit the "Big Kahuna" – a drop-off into "Lunch Counter" – a great set of rapids. And then the outfitter told us about the possibility of falling out of the raft and getting pulled into a "suck-hole", a washing machine like swirl of water that will drag you under and keep sucking you down so that you can't get a breath of air. He said the more you fight it . . . the more you'll get pulled down – sort of like quick sand. The more scared you get, the harder you fight. And the harder you fight, the more you get sucked in. It just keeps feeding on itself.

The secret, he said, is to not let your fear get hold of you. He said all you need to do is curl up like a little ball and ride with it, and it will spit you right back out again. Sort of like FDR's inaugural address, when he said *The only thing we have to fear is fear itself*.

I think life's a little like a raft trip on the Snake River. There are times of great calm where we just float along peacefully, not noticing the beautiful Grand Tetons as they go by. And there are times of exhilarating thrill and other moments when the best we can do is hang on and just hope for the best . . . hope we get spit back out again. The challenge in life – just like in rafting – is learning how to ride the rapids and take comfort in the still waters. And learning how to handle those suck-holes without letting fear overpower us.

Too often, I know I tend to let fear take on a life of its own and I end up fighting against the most challenging moments, when I'd be much better off learning how to ride through those moments gracefully. There are moments in life when we need to let go, curl up in a protective ball, and ride our way out. But fear is a powerful motivator. It can cause us to doubt, it can cause us to act irrationally.

I wonder – what are you afraid of?

- places, unknowns, people, experiences, illness, pain, risks?

Do you ever fear being identified with someone who could ruin your reputation? May even put you in physical jeopardy?

I think that's what happened to the disciples – and especially to Thomas. They'd been on a wild ride. It had been exciting for those “nothing-too-special-about-them-everyday-men” to get caught up in a movement – to be the inner circle of such an outspoken agent of change. There'd been plenty of scary moments plunging over great transformative waterfalls. But they'd always felt safe enough with Jesus guiding the boat.

Then everything changed – Jesus was dead. And now they were on the verge of drowning and they knew it. They weren't just scared – they were do-anything-you-can-save-yourself-terrified. And when you feel like that, your thinking gets kind of cloudy. (Have you ever felt like that?) And they thought the one way to save themselves was to fight their way out – to escape before it was too late. So they hid away in that locked room to plan their next move.

We don't know just what they discussed behind those closed doors, but it's pretty clear that they were cowering in fear. My guess is they were devising the best way to sneak out of town. Maybe they could slip out in ones and twos. And once they were well out of town they could regroup as they made their way home, north to Galilee. In my mind, that's what they were scheming, in that house behind those locked doors. Don't let anybody know who they were. Peter had already had to deny knowing Jesus – not once, not twice, but three times. They were scared they would be found guilty by association.

Isn't that a sad testament to humanity? Guilty by association. That's what the disciples feared. And for good reason – we seem to do that a lot. Just in the last few weeks, think of how many times the three remaining presidential candidates have been smeared – not by their

own actions, but by association: Jeremiah Wright, Geraldine Ferraro, John Hagee, Louis Farrakhan, Elliot Spitzer, Rod Parsley (and that's the short list). It's not about the person. It's about who they know, *and who knows them*. How many times in the least few weeks have you heard commentators say that a person's character IS defined by the people with whom he/she associates?

Funny thing is -- that's exactly what Jesus' critics said about him. Look at the people he spent time with: thieves, lepers, rogues, prostitutes, tax-collectors, women, Samaritans. Talk about questionable characters! But Jesus never tried to justify his associations with the outcast and the shunned and the despised. He wasn't afraid of them or what others would think of him because they saw him with them. He always defined himself by his own being. And he had no fear of guilt by association.

Have you ever known one of those kids that none of the other kids like? One of those kids that becomes like a leper that no other kid wants to be associated with so they all keep their distance for fear of being branded as one and the same – and the object of cruel gossip and practical jokes. And anybody associated with that kid immediately becomes an outcast, too, or worse. It's ugly, but it happens all the time. And it doesn't stop with children – it's typically more subtle (more nuanced), but the same thing happens among adults. That's what happened with the disciples after Jesus' death. Being associated with him would mean death for them too.

One of the purest forms of love I've ever seen was with an outcast kid like that at a summer church camp in the northwest corner of Connecticut. Willie (even his name caused him trouble), Willie just didn't get it. He had a stutter that immediately became the cause for ridicule among the twelve year old girls. He wasn't athletically inclined and he looked a little funny too. And to top it off, he wore brown socks with his sneakers, while all the other kids wore short white sports socks. No kid dared go near him. Then, on the third night of camp, at a campfire singalong, Willie was once again all by himself. And that's when I saw it. One of the girls went over to where Willie was sitting all by himself and offered to share her song book with him.

Later that night, as we walked back to our cabins, I asked the girl: "Why did you do that? Why did you sit with Willie?" In what seemed to be a whisper, I could have sworn she said: *Because God needed a friend.* "What?" I said. *Because Willie needed a friend.* I'm now sure that she was talking about Willie all along . . . but the truth is she just as well may have been talking about God's need. She moved beyond that fear of what others would think of her and acted in faith. She didn't fight what she knew was right. She just did it. She acted – quite simply – as Jesus would have. I never did see if her camping friends shunned her because she sat with Willie. But I'm quite certain she was at peace with herself. And I'm not sure we can hope for much more than that.

I wonder . . . Can you think of someone with whom you're afraid to be associated? Not just because you don't enjoy him or her, but because you know you will then be judged by association?

Maybe they're painfully unpopular? Maybe they've gotten into trouble. It doesn't matter if the trouble is real or perceived – it's potential trouble for you. Maybe they lean way too far to the left or too far to the right? Maybe it's the wrong church? Or . . . well, for each of us it's different. What is it for you? Who is it for you? Can you picture the person?

Now, what do you think would happen if you prayed for them? On a regular basis. Prayed for them – not for them to change but for you to love them as they are. Maybe it would drive you to spend time with them. To get over those fears. To actually act like the disciples should have acted. To love them. And . . . in the end, to really love God. We could do a whole lot worse than that.