

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Fear is a terrible thing. Our Gospel reading today begins by telling us, “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews...”, the question occurred to me, “What were they afraid of?” Had someone threatened them? Were people searching for them? Were they afraid that they would all be rounded up and crucified like Jesus? Maybe all of the above or maybe it was just rumors. Surely there were rumors. There always are. Wherever there is conflict between people, rumors fly. Fear escalates. Reason is suspended.

If you’re inclined to follow the stock market, this past week has been a dousy. It went up and down like a see-saw, based on rumors of possible trade wars between the U.S. and China or rumors of whether the President will or won’t do whatever he says on a given day. The ups and downs of the stock market, analysts tell us are often governed by irrational fear.

Idle rumors can ruin a life. They can start a rebellion. They can trap good people behind closed doors because of fear. There was no evidence that the Jewish leaders intended any harm to Jesus’ followers, but there were rumors and that was enough to destroy a sense of well-being for those first followers of the Lord.

Many of us can identify with such fear. There is much to fear in our society. That fear is often fed by rumor. We seem to have perfected the rumor mill in our society. Just look at how we react to the possibility of snow in our weather forecasts.

This past week a cashier in the supermarket told me she knew snow was in the forecast because they were selling out of bread, milk, and eggs. They are always the first things that fly off the shelf when people are fearful of the snow.

In all likelihood the disciples were locked behind closed doors because of the proliferation of rumors.

Here I’d like to differentiate between irrational fears and due caution. This week I picked up the phone in the rectory to make a call and got transferred to an office at Verizon. I hung up, thinking I had mis-dialed and called again. Again I was transferred to Verizon. I immediately thought, “O Lord, were we late paying the phone bill.” I asked Mary Beth about it and she said it had been happening all week, but just on that one line. So I called another number on the same line and received the same Verizon office. I held on and a representative told me that the line had been restricted and I should call the Verizon’s fraud division.

I was told that Verizon restricted use of that line because two calls that were out of the ordinary were made to Morocco for a total of 58 minutes at a cost of over \$200.00 last Saturday. I explained last Saturday was Holy Saturday and there was no one in the office. It wasn't possible that any calls were made from the rectory. I was told to get in touch with the people who installed the phone system and have them upgrade our security on the system. Only then would they take the restriction off the phone line and not charge us for the calls. Mary Wishneski called our provider and they indeed found that one of our voice mail accounts had been hacked. They changed our security settings and our service was restored.

But, after sleeping on it, I thought it was unlikely anyone in Parkesburg was calling Morocco. Who would? Then, because I'm aware that we live in a scary world, it occurred to me that perhaps a terrorist cell had hacked into our phone system. It wasn't so much fear that motivated me, but it was due caution that led me to call the FBI and make them aware of the strange occurrence. When we see or experience something out of the ordinary, due caution dictates that we should respond to it reasonably and rationally.

But the disciples locked themselves behind closed doors out of irrational fear. And many of us do that as well. Too many of us lock the doors of our hearts against people who look different than us or talk different than us or believe different than us or have opinions that differ from ours. As a result our nation, our communities, sometimes even our families have become terribly polarized. We have become less and less tolerant of each other, motivated by irrational fears.

The disciples, like us, were not atheists or agnostics, but they locked themselves in and others out because they had temporarily misplaced their faith. They followed Jesus because they had a deep and abiding faith in the God of their ancestors, a God who would never forsake them. Where was their faith now—the faith that had sustained them all of their lives?

The story is told of a young boy riding a bus home from his Catholic school. Because he had done well in a math quiz, the Sister gave him a holy card with a picture of Christ and a caption that read, "Have Faith in God". He was showing the card to a friend, when it slipped from his hand and flew out the window. He cried, "Stop the bus! I've lost my Faith in God!"

The driver stopped the bus, and the boy got out and ran back to retrieve his holy card. One of the bus mothers smiled and made a comment about the innocence of youth. The other more perceptive mother said, "All of us would be better off if we were that concerned about our faith."

Under stress, something like that often happens to us. We temporarily misplace our faith. It seems to fly out the window when fears overtake us. Craig Cardine, Joanne's husband,

recently told me how hard it is to hold on in faith as he watches her suffer so, and there's nothing he can do to relieve her. But, then he said, "It seems that every time I'm ready to give up on God, one of you from the Church turns up, offers to help, texts us, or some way or another shows us such unbelievable love, I have to believe that God is with us".

That's what happened to those first disciples on that first night of the week, overcome by fear—afraid to live, afraid to die—Jesus became present to them and said, "Peace be with you!" I'm here. I'm with you.

Fear seeps into all of our lives from time to time. The fear of the child, feeling abandoned in the darkness of night, or the fear that consumes him or her on that dreadful first day of school, feeling abandoned by parents who will never come back. Such fear stays with us for the rest of our lives, whether we are aware of it or not. The fear resurfaces when a friend moves away or a first love rejects you or a life-long spouse dies. The fear of abandonment, even by God, can overwhelm us. Jesus experienced it on the Cross, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned Me."

The Good News of today's Gospel is that Jesus Christ can penetrate every closed door in our lives and dispel our every fear. Hear him speak his reassuring word to you today, "Peace be with you". Then open your eyes to see, your ears to hear, your hearts to feel his Presence in your life. See Him in the love of your Church Family that surrounds you, as Craig and Joanne are doing; hear Him in the words of the hymns that we sing, or, perhaps, even in the words that I am speaking; experience Him in the beauty of our worship, in the breaking of the bread and the drinking from the cup. Then, cry out with the Apostle Thomas, "My Lord and My God".

Only then can we take up the work that the Lord has given us to do: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." This is the mission of the Church—to proclaim God's merciful, already-forgiving love, not to just some nebulous world out there, but to the one beside you that fear has caused you to lock out of your heart.