

HOMILY

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The Second Sunday of Easter

Rev. Andrew A. Czajkowski

St. John the Evangelist Parish

Davison, Michigan

Advice columnist Ann Landers received over 10,000 letters a day before her death in 2002. Once, when asked what the most common problem people write about was, without hesitation, she said, “Fear.”

Fear comes in many forms. Louis Pasteur is reported to have such an irrational fear of dirt and infection that he refused to shake hands. President and Mrs. Benjamin Harrison were so intimidated by the newfangled electricity installed in the White House that they didn’t dare touch the switches. If there weren’t servants around to turn off the lights when the Harrisons went to bed, they slept with them on. Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin so feared for his safety that his residence in Moscow contained eight bedrooms. Each night Stalin chose a bedroom at random to sleep in to ensure that no one knew exactly where he was located.

How many of us are afraid of what our friends will think, afraid of ridicule, afraid of failing, afraid of being hurt? Even the Disciples of Jesus gave in to fear. Fearing the same people that had arrested, convicted, and crucified Jesus, they retreated to the safety of the upper room where they could close and lock the door tight. They probably figured they would lay low for awhile, wait out the danger, and then, when the uproar over Jesus had passed, they would slip out of Jerusalem and back to their old lives. They probably figured that once the crisis was over, they could go back to the way things used to be. And so there they were, with the doors locked in fear, when Jesus suddenly came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Was he greeting them with a blessing—“Peace be with you!”—or was he trying to calm them down?

We know that Jesus’ second most common command was “To love.” What was his first? “Don’t be afraid.” But they were afraid. It was all too much for them. So what did he do? He said to them, “Peace be with you!” and he showed them his hands and his side. He wanted them to know it was really him.

How many of us spend literally years of our lives worrying about finances, worrying about our health, worrying about our loved ones, worrying what people think about us, worrying about whether they think about us at all? If we could only trust our lives to God, if we could truly believe that Jesus really did arise from the grave, if we could truly believe that our lives are in God's hands and that God loves us more than we love our own children—then there is no limit to what God might be able to do for us and through us.

Pastor Ron Mehl tells of an experience his friends Bob and Gayle Potter had as foster parents. One of the Potter's foster children was a six-year-old girl named Sasha. Sasha had been abused and neglected by her family. She was fearful and unable to trust anyone. One day, Gayle discovered that little Sasha was hiding food in her room. And not just small snacks. She had stuffed food into every nook and cranny, hiding it in the closet, under her mattress, behind the door. The little girl had grown up with the fear that there would never be enough—enough food, enough love, enough security. She hoarded every bit of food she could find, just in case she couldn't trust the adults to take care of her.

How sad. And yet, how very much like us. Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread. He taught us not to look ahead to the next day's cares and concerns; they would take care of themselves. Just focus on today and trust God.

But some of us can't do that, can we? We're afraid, friends. The meaning of Jesus showing the Disciples his hands and his side is that it doesn't have to be that way. As someone said, the presence of fear is a sure sign that we're trusting in our own strength. When will we quit hoarding life and start trusting life to our loving Father?

Christ said a second time, "Peace be with you!" Then he added some important words: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Why did they need the Holy Spirit? Because he would no longer be with them physically. There would be days, weeks, months and years when he would not be able to reassure them by showing his hands and side. They would need to depend on the Holy Spirit

And that's true for us as well. With lives that are timid and tentative, filled with so many concerns and worries and fears, we need to pray that Jesus' spirit will be as real to us as it was to them.

Now the question is, what could you and I do if we truly believed that Christ is risen from the dead? Could we make a difference in the world? Could we become more loving? Could we become more trusting and less fearful?

Bette Midler sang a little tune years ago that struck a chord with many sensitive hearts. The words went like this:

*It's the heart afraid of breaking
that never learns to dance.*

*It's the dream afraid of waking
that never takes a chance*

*It's the one who won't be taken
who cannot seem to give
and the soul afraid of dying
that never learns to live.*

Is that where you are right now? Are you the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live? Are you hiding in fear behind locked doors? Listen, Jesus can come into any room if you will let him. Jesus can give you his peace. He can breathe on you his spirit. Will you let him? Don't let any more of life pass you by. Christ is alive. There is nothing in heaven or earth that we ever need to fear again.