Sermon – John 20:19-31

“A No-Doubt Message Makes No-Fear Messengers”

I need you to play a game with me this morning. I think you probably know this one. It’s called “Would you rather.” I give you two alternatives and you have to choose one. The point is to get you to really think about why you’d prefer the one thing to the other. So here we go:

Would you rather get a cavity filled at the dentist or go canvassing on a Wednesday evening or Saturday afternoon? Would you rather stay an hour and a half late at work or come along with me or Pastor on follow-up visits? Would you rather be stuck in traffic or spend a few hours to be the face of Abiding Grace at a community event? Would you rather be on hold with customer service for 45 minutes or steer a conversation with a non-Christian acquaintance toward church?

If you’re anything like me, you have to seriously think about those to give an honest answer. But why is that? In each of them, we’re weighing mildly unpleasant parts of life against opportunities to share our faith. I asked you to choose between unfortunate necessities and the privilege of participating in the spread of God’s kingdom. It should be an easy choice! Why isn’t it?

Could it be that we find sharing our faith to be mildly unpleasant, too? I know why you might feel that way. There are so many more comfortable things we could be talking about! Religion is so personal – for me, and probably for them, too. Who am I to invade that space? What if they don’t want to talk to me – what if they’re offended? Even worse, what if I mess it up? I don’t know what I’m doing. I could say the wrong thing or look stupid or come off as pushy or so many other things. We get to thinking that maybe we should schedule a dentist appointment so we can avoid it altogether.

It seems the bottom line is we’re just afraid. We’re afraid that we’re not capable of it. We’re afraid that we’re not doing any good. We’re afraid that our witness will seem silly. We’re afraid of being exposed and “out there.” We’re afraid of being rejected. We’re afraid, and every fear we have springs from some little bit of doubt.

There might be no better illustration of that fact than the disciples on the evening of that first Easter. So often we get on Thomas for doubting (thus the name “Doubting Thomas”), but really he was no different from the other disciples. They all doubted that Jesus was risen, even after the women came running from the tomb with their Easter morning news. They doubted the message they heard, and the fear it was meant to calm remained.

The disciples were afraid of a whole lot. They were afraid of the Jews, we’re told – and why not? They had shown just three days earlier that they were willing to bend the rules and distort justice to kill Jesus and his teaching. But yet, there were probably other subtler fears there as well. They were afraid that they had committed their lives to the wrong thing – that their hopes and dreams and goals had been foolish – that their last three years had been wasted. They were afraid that without Jesus they couldn’t be what they’d thought they were. They were afraid of being rejected.

How foolish were they?! They had the solution to all those doubts. The women had brought it from the tomb – “Jesus is risen! He is not dead! He is who he said he is! He is the Christ, the Son of God, and he has taken away all of our sins.” Not even the Jewish leaders held any real threat for them, because Jesus defeated death and gave them eternal life! That message brought comfort and victory over fear, if only they would believe it! But instead they stayed stuck in their doubts.

But Jesus didn’t want that for them. He wanted them to be free from fear – he wanted them to have the peace that comes from knowing he's alive, and so he came to them to give them a no-doubt message of victory. **“Peace be with you!”** Here I am! Get rid of your doubt! Get rid of your fear! The message you heard about me is true! I am risen!

And with Jesus standing bodily before them, visible, touchable – with the marks of his execution still evident on his hands and side – then their doubts and fears were driven away. They rejoiced! Thomas, who was a week behind, declared what was now indisputably proven: **“My Lord and my God!”** Jesus is who he said he was. He did what he said he came to do. And now he lives again to give people the no-doubt message of victory in him.

Wouldn’t it be nice if Jesus did that for us? Wouldn’t it be nice if, just once, Jesus would come and show himself to be the living, powerful Savior we’ve heard about? Maybe if he’d appear to us like he did for John on Patmos in our reading from Revelation. If we saw with our own eyes just how glorious and powerful he is, it would be a whole lot easier to believe that he goes with us wherever we go. It would be easier to trust that he’ll give me the right words to present him to others. It would be easier to believe that no matter what anyone else says, I’m important and loved by him. If Jesus would just come and show me how I fit into his plan, I wouldn’t doubt so much that he wants to use *me* of all people to spread his kingdom.

But he hasn’t promised to do that. As much as we might want it, that is not the way he comes to us. When he talks about us, he says, **“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”** That’s the reason he appeared to his disciples – the reason he appeared again for Thomas: so they could record for us yet another eyewitness account of his resurrection. Like John said about the things he wrote, **“These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”** That’s the way that Jesus promises to come and show himself to you: in his powerful Word.

It’s that Word that drives out doubt. Through it, the Holy Spirit works to remove uncertainty and replace it with faith. Connected with earthly elements in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, he works to strengthen our defenses against the devil’s lies. And with his no-doubt message, he takes timid, fearful hearts and equips people to be his no-fear messengers.

Look back to the disciples: Jesus came to bring them the peace of his resurrection, and immediately then sent them out to share it. **“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you…If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”** He sent out his disciples – those same men who had been crippled by doubt and fear – to proclaim forgiveness to those who trusted in him, and call to repentance those who did not. How was this going to work out?

Well, lo and behold, Jesus knew what he was doing. You heard in our lesson from Acts 5 how his disciples were willing to go to jail for preaching the Easter message, and how after they were released they went right back to the same spot and did the same thing they were arrested for in the first place. You heard how they stood up to the Jewish leaders and declared their loyalty to their Savior above all things, even at risk to their body and life. Were these the same men? Yes, they were, but the message they believed and preached had changed them. They were no longer timid and fearful, but had been equipped to be Jesus’ no-fear messengers.

That’s not to say they didn’t have nerves. It doesn’t even mean that they found every moment and detail to be enjoyable. But it does mean that because Jesus had taken away their doubts, they had nothing to fear from anyone or anything. No one could take away anything that really mattered. Because he lives, they lived. Because he rose, they, too would rise. Jesus sent them to be his messengers gave them promises that nothing would or could change.

And those are the same promises he gives to you. When you’re afraid of putting yourself out there all by yourself, he promises he’s right there supporting you and that you’re not alone. When you worry about saying the right thing, he promises that the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say. When you’re afraid of being rejected, he promises that he accepts faithful service, regardless of the visible results. And when you fear that you’re not good enough to make a difference, he promises that it doesn’t depend on you, and his word will not return to him empty.

So don’t be afraid of evangelism. I know, a whole lot easier said than done, right? But recognize that God has given you the cure for doubt and fear: it’s his always-true promises – his no-doubt message. Go back to that message daily! Spend time in God’s Word to fill yourself up with life from the living Jesus, to reassure yourself of his promises. And then, trust those promises enough to take them to others as God’s no-fear messenger.

There are lots of ways you can do that. In the new Wednesday night Bible Study that started this week, we talked about how sharing your faith can start really small. It can start with just being friendly and caring about another person. It can be as simple as casually mentioning your involvement at church and letting people make a connection. Over time, the people who get to know you will see how your relationship with Jesus affects your life, and you may have a chance to tell them about it.

It can be a casual thing, but it’s also good to be intentional about evangelism. And that’s why I want to encourage all of you to be a part of the outreach efforts at Abiding Grace. Come for canvassing outings! Let me know you want to visit some people on our mailing list! Volunteer for making some phone calls. It can seem scary sometimes, I know. Sometimes it still is for me. But let Jesus’ promise of peace and help and courage get you over that hump. We can do all sorts of things to try and make you comfortable, like pairing you up with someone who’s done it before or not making you talk, but Jesus’ no-doubt message is the only thing that can truly make no-fear messengers out of people like us. Thankfully, that’s exactly what he gives us.

So fill yourself up every day with that no-doubt message of peace, and then take that message and take it boldly out into our community and into your life. What’s that message? Let me tell you: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.