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DEFEATING THE INSIDIOUS VIRUS

John 20:19-23

Astronomer James Bell III said it is “An insidious virus. Given a breeding place in our minds, it will eat away our spirit.” George Adair, the 19th century developer, said everything you’ve ever wanted lies on the other side of it. George Lucas said it is the path to the dark side. In other words, this insidious virus won’t just eat away your spirit, it will turn you into Darth Vader. Philosopher Bertrand Russell said that all forms of it cause fatigue. When you have it, it saps your strength and makes you weak and weary.

What is this terrible virus that eats away our spirit, tires us out and turns us toward evil? It isn’t Covid or some other nasty new disease. It has been around for as long as there have been human beings. It is fear, something we all are familiar with. Shakespeare said of all the base passions, it is most accursed. There are many brave words people have come up with about fear. Marie Curie said, “Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood.” Yeah, that sounds great. Except she should have feared what she sought to understand. It ended up killing her.

What do you fear? In 2020 the whole world feared a new virus that swept over the entire globe. I remember an interesting moment at one point during the pandemic when I realized the thing they were saying about the virus was true, that many people in my age group who got that disease were dying from it. I thought, “If I get this thing, I could conceivably die from it.” It was a little unsettling. I’m very thankful that virus has mutated into a less threatening form. Laurie and I finally got it after more than 3 years of the pandemic, and all it killed was a vacation.

The pandemic proved to be a prelude for me personally. After getting through that I had my encounter with cancer, and got to look fear in the face. Experiencing fear is not pleasant, and it is definitely not helpful. It doesn’t necessarily turn us into Darth Vader, but it surely does eat away at our spirit and can cause us to compromise and act in ways we would otherwise never do. It can make us irrational. Today we are going to consider what can help us with our fears as we look at John 20:19-23.

THE DISCIPLES WERE AFRAID

Mary and the others had their encounters with the empty tomb, then with Jesus himself early on Sunday morning. Don’t you wonder what went on the rest of that day? There must have been a ton of discussion as word got out that Jesus’ tomb was empty and Mary had claimed she’d seen him alive. What’s going on? What do you think has really happened? What do you think of what Mary said? What do you think is going to happen next? I can’t help wondering what Jesus was doing that day. In Luke 24 there is a glimpse of what he was up to. Two unnamed disciples had already decided to get out of Dodge, or in this case Jerusalem, and were hightailing it to a village called Emmaus, about 7 miles away. I’m pretty sure they were hoping to secretly get away from the authorities. On the way they had an encounter with the risen Jesus. He explained to them how all that had happened was planned all along.

Whatever the case, what we do know is the disciples were laying low. That Sunday evening after Jesus’ execution most of them were together at some unspecified location. We know they were trying to keep their location a secret and they had the doors locked. They were afraid that the Jewish religious leaders, who had been successful in getting Jesus executed, might be coming after them next. That wasn’t paranoia. It was a reasonable assumption. That wasn’t actually happening at that point. The Jewish religious leaders thought they had put an end to the Jesus movement. They weren’t concerned that Peter, James, John, Nathaniel, Andrew, Matthew and the rest, a bunch of total nobodies, would be able to generate any kind of movement without their charismatic leader, Jesus. No Jesus, no movement. Let those fishermen go back to their nets. That assumption would prove to be wrong as thousands of people began worshiping Jesus. That’s when the leaders would begin persecuting the disciples but that would be quite some time later.

So that Sunday night we see them gathered in that locked room, afraid for their lives, probably talking about what was the best way to quietly slip out of town without being identified by the authorities. Then the whole world changed with what happened in verse 19. “Then Jesus came and stood among them.”

That is a rather understated and prosaic way of saying something astounding. The previously dead Jesus suddenly appeared. The room was locked. Jesus didn’t open the door. He didn’t knock on the door and ask if he could come in. He didn’t sneak in through a window. He was suddenly just there. It was like Scotty had beamed him into the room from somewhere else. The disciples had seen him die, and now he was there, miraculously with them in the room. His being alive was the huge miracle, but his entrance was also astounding.

You can safely assume that the disciples were more than astonished. Luke 24:37 says when Jesus suddenly appeared, “They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.” That’s not surprising. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them screamed like little girls. Perhaps at least someone in the group had to change his underwear. To say the least, they were dumbfounded and confused and scared.

How did Jesus pull off that stunt? How did he suddenly show up in a locked room without opening a door? In some ways that might be a sort of unimportant question, since it’s in the context of Jesus being alive after dying. Compared to that, suddenly popping up in a locked room is no big deal. Maybe he had powers that allowed him to singlehandedly move massive stones, overcome squads of Roman soldiers, walk through solid walls and leap tall buildings at a single bound. Okay, never mind that last one. That was Superman. At this point all we have is speculation. But there are some interesting thoughts that can at least help us a bit.

Start with the fact that God is eternal. That means he existed when there was no such thing as time. He created time and is not bounded by it. That has some interesting possibilities. Jesus proved by his resurrection that he was God revealing himself in human form. As such, he is not limited by time. So consider the possibility of someone moving through time. Imagine this individual could move freely backward and forward through time. This time traveler could pull some cool tricks. He could be sitting in a room with us and choose to move forward in time by one minute. Suppose he does that and also changes his seat when he does so. To us, in the continuum of time, he would seem to suddenly disappear from our sight, then one minute later appear in a different part of the room. It would be astounding and seemingly miraculous to us, but to him it would just be a normal thing. Perhaps this is what Jesus did.

Another intriguing possibility is one I favor. Physicists now suggest that there may be more dimensions than the ones we live in and are limited to. In his book, *More Than Meets The Eye*, Dr. Richard Swenson said that string theory, a branch of physics, posits that there may be as many as 9 spatial dimensions. I can’t even imagine what that means. We can’t envision the nature of other dimensions. Way back in 1884 English school master, Edwin Abbott, wrote a novel titled *Flatland: A Romance Of Many Dimensions*. In it he depicted a two dimensional world inhabited by squares, polygons and beings of other shapes, all two dimensional. In the year 1999 the central character, a square, is visited by a sphere, a being who exists in 3 dimensions. This being tries to convince the square that a third dimension exists, and does things that astound the square. The sphere can appear suddenly and disappear simply by moving up and down in a dimension the square cannot see.

So imagine that Jesus exists in another dimension. Perhaps the spiritual realm is that dimension. He could easily have the ability to go from that dimension that we 3 dimensional beings can’t detect, into our 3D world and then back out again. To us he would seem to suddenly appear or disappear because we cannot perceive that other dimension. This could be a way of thinking about how Jesus operated. It might be helpful in understanding how he did what he did, plus it also has some cool implications for us today, as we will see.

The disciples were fearful and anxious that night. They were afraid the authorities were coming for them next. They were startled and afraid when the previously dead Jesus suddenly and miraculously appeared in the room, and Jesus is about to assign a task to them that would have seemed daunting and intimidating.

JESUS PROVIDED A SOLUTION FOR FEAR

Jesus did several things in these verses that would help the disciples get over their fears. The first one was the most important. When he appeared he said literally, “Peace to you.” The NIV translates that “peace be with you,” which is similar to a number of other translations. It is an acceptable translation, but I don’t believe it’s quite right. When I’m afraid I don’t need peace to be with me. I need it to be in me. What I think Jesus was saying was “Be at peace.”

This was a crucial theme. He says it again in verse 21. He makes a later appearance to the disciples in verse 26 and again says, “Peace to you.” Clearly this was something he felt was important to get across. They needed to be at peace. But saying, “Be at peace” doesn’t always help, does it. When you’re really stressed about something and someone says to you, “Relax, don’t worry about it. Everything will be all right,” do you suddenly find yourself completely at ease, confident and calm, no longer stressed at all? Being at peace is often easier said than done.

However, Jesus gave them a reason to be at peace. He showed them his hands and side. He showed them the scars from the spikes that had been driven through his hands and from the spear that had been rammed into him. There are a couple of things I find remarkable about that. First, this is Sunday night. He had been executed on Friday. It had only been 2 days since he had been through that torture. Last fall I had surgery to remove part of my thyroid gland. It was much less painful than I expected it to be. Nevertheless, I can assure you that 2 days after the surgery that wound was not all healed. That took a little while. Maybe Jesus was a really fast healer. But I think it was more a function of Jesus miraculously and completely recovering from his ordeal. I believe he was completely healthy that night with only the scars remaining as evidence of the torture he had been subjected to.

Why were the scars still there? I can hardly see the scar from that surgery 8 months ago. Apparently they were needed to assure Jesus’ followers that it really was him standing in front of them. It wasn’t some phantasm, or a look alike stunt double or some sort of clone. It was really Jesus, and he had the scars to prove it. I find this interesting because we are told that we will some day rise from the dead like Jesus did, including having a new kind of body like he did, one that does not age and die. But I think this means that there will be some distinguishing things about us that will enable others to identify us. Just as Jesus had those scars to show who he really was, I think there will be identifying marks about us by which others will be able to recognize us.

Jesus could tell them to be at peace because he was there with them. They could be at peace because they weren’t seeing things. He wasn’t the ghost of Jesus past come to haunt them. It was really the flesh and blood Jesus with them just as he had been with them for the past few years, just as he had been with them in that room the night before he was arrested. The presence of the very real Jesus meant they didn’t need to fear him. But it also would put their other fears at ease.

Remember the story of the time all of them were in a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee, which is really a big lake. I don’t know why they didn’t call it the Lake of Galilee. It’s Lake Erie, not the Sea of Erie, or Lake Michigan, not the Sea of Michigan. Up north we have the Sea of Tahoe, but I prefer to call it Lake Tahoe. But that’s obviously beside the point. They were rowing across that big lake when a storm rolled in. That lake is almost 700 feet below sea level and is surrounded by hills with significant gorges and canyons. The wind coming from the west gets funneled by those canyons and in a very short time period can turn into violent storms on the lake. I read one man’s account of a visit to that lake when he watched the perfect, calm day turn into one of the most violent storms he has ever seen in the space of a quarter of an hour. That happened to the disciples and Jesus that day.

Several of those guys were experienced fishermen who were adept at being on that lake in a boat. On this occasion they were overmatched by the elements. They realized the boat was going down and they freaked out. Jesus was so concerned about the situation that he was asleep. How do you sleep when you’re on a boat in a storm? The wind is howling, the waves are crashing over the boat and tossing it up and down, back and forth. It would be only human to be wet, cold, and very scared, and Jesus was asleep. The boys went to wake him up, I guess because they didn’t want him to die in his sleep. Or maybe they thought Jesus should at least be aware of it when they all died. But Jesus told the storm to knock it off, and there was instantly total calm. Matthew 8:22 says, “The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him.”

Just asking the question pretty much gives you the answer. What kind of man tells the wind and waves what to do and they obey him? Well he’s not an ordinary human, that’s for sure. Surfers would want him to be their best friend. Hey, if the wind and waves obey him, how about today, Jesus, you tell the wind to take the day off and instruct the waves to form a series of perfect barreling 8 footers? I can’t help but think if I were a witness to that episode I’d have a pretty good idea that this guy somehow had the power of God. And I’m pretty sure I never again would have been concerned about my safety if Jesus was in the boat with me, no matter what the wind and waves were doing.

That Sunday night in that locked room Jesus upped the ante. Wait, he was dead. We saw him die 2 nights ago. What kind of man is this who dies, then a couple of days later walks out of his tomb and somehow shows up in a locked room seemingly out of thin air? I’ll tell you what kind of man does that. One who has all the power of God. At that point I’d be quite sure that there is nothing he can’t do.

All those memories would have been flooding into their minds. Jesus turning water into wine. Jesus healing 10 lepers in one fell swoop. Jesus healing blind people, and paralyzed cripples. Jesus walking on the surface of the lake! Jesus feeding thousands of people from an absurdly small amount of food that somehow just kept coming. Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life after he had been dead 4 days. Now they know for sure. They are in the presence of the divine, God in human form. There is nothing too hard for him. And that means that as long as Jesus is with them, they have nothing to fear.

I have recently had to have a couple of superficial skin cancers excised. They told me that a week after the procedure they would remove the stitches they put in. I wasn’t terrified of that, but I figured it wouldn’t be the most pleasant thing I could experience either. But I was surprised the first time because I didn’t feel anything. So going in the second time I wasn’t even the tiniest bit apprehensive. I was calm and confident knowing I had nothing to be afraid of.

Because Jesus had defeated death, had overcome the very worst that the world could throw at him, the disciples now had every reason to have peace. They certainly didn’t need to be afraid of Jesus, because they knew he was real. But they also didn’t need to be afraid of what the authorities might do to them. What could they do that they had not done to Jesus, and Jesus overcame all of it! He had the power of Almighty God, so they could not lose. Go ahead, religious leaders, go ahead, Pilate and all the forces of Rome. Do your worst. It won’t matter, because Jesus is with us, and he is more powerful than all of you put together.

Knowing who Jesus really is, knowing his power and knowing he would be with them, made them ca,m and confident. Hey Jesus is giving us this big task of taking his message to the world. He’s telling us to take over for him when that seems impossible. But Jesus is with us, so we don’t need to fear this task.

There are a couple of other things that Jesus did that would help them deal with fear. In verse 21 he said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” The Father had sent Jesus into the world to reveal him. In John 1:18 it says that no one has ever seen God, but that Jesus has made him known. That was a big part of Jesus’ mission in this world. The other part is he came to seek and save the lost. To proclaim freedom for the captives, to being the message of life to the dying.

Jesus was telling his men that he was now giving that job to them. They were going to make the character of God known. They were going to seek and save the lost. They were going to carry on the greatest mission in the universe. Nothing can compare with the eternal importance of this mission. That is important because it would give them something to focus on instead of their fear. Have you ever thought the question of why anyone would ever play the game of baseball? It’s actually a scary game. I know, you might say, “Oh, come on, baseball? I get that football can be scary. You stand a good chance in that game of getting your head knocked off. And hockey? Yikes, the potential for getting a stick in the face or a puck in the nose is quite high. But baseball? What’s scary about that?” Have you ever picked up a baseball? That thing is hard as a rock. If you attempt to play that game you are going to find out that it can do you damage. You discover that when someone hits a hot ground ball at you and you try to field it that there are no guarantees that it will bounce the way you expect it to. Balls occasionally take bad hops. I recall one time that I went to field a ground ball and at the last instant it took a much higher hop than I expected and it smacked me right in the mouth. I bled like crazy and had a fat lip for several days. Jerry had one bounce up and hit him over his eye. He ended up with several stitches to close up the cut. But that’s not the biggest concern. The big problem is you are going to have to bat. You stand at the plate and 60 feet away there’s a guy that’s going to throw that rock at you with all his might. The number one issue in becoming a hitter is getting over fear of the ball. I once took a fastball on my elbow and my entire arm went numb. Then the numbness wore off and the pain showed up. My arm actually swelled up that night to nearly twice it’s normal size. The point is, this is dangerous. Why does anyone do it? You’d think that the norm would be the first time some pitcher sends a little chin music your way, buzzes your noggin with a fastball, would be the last time you ever held a bat at the plate. Because it is downright scary.

So my question stands. Why does anyone choose to do that? It is because there is some desire to play the game, some joy in doing a good job fielding a ground ball or hitting a fastball that matters so much that you are able to ignore the fear or overcome it. The mission of playing baseball eclipses the fear of the ball. If it doesn’t, you would never play the game.

In an immeasurably larger arena with far more at stake, having that mission given by God plays a role in overcoming fear. As we focus on the mission, the fears are eclipsed. In Acts 4 Peter and John got arrested because they were preaching about Jesus. They were called before the authorities, the ones who worked so hard to get Jesus executed. This was the very thing the disciples had been afraid of when they were hiding out in that locked room. The thing that so intimidated them had now befallen them. The authorities were stumped by these two, and in the end all they could do was threaten them and tell them to quit talking about Jesus. In verses 19-20 Peter and John said, “Which is right in God’s eyes, to listen to you or to him? You be the judges. As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Wow. They were on a mission, and the mission overcame their fear.

But Jesus had one more thing to help with the fear. Verse 22 says he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, would give them the courage to overcome fear. If you’re a biblical scholar you might be saying, “Wait, I thought the Holy Spirit was given to the believers later on the day of Pentecost, which happened weeks after this.”

You would be right. There are some who say John is at odds with Luke, the writer of Acts about when the Holy Spirit was given. But that is not the case. The translators actually have not helped us here. The verse doesn’t say Jesus “breathed on them.” It literally just says he breathed. This translation makes it sound like Jesus somehow breathed his Spirit into them, but he didn’t. He just breathed. In Greek the words breath, wind and spirit are all the same. I think he breathed to tell them the Spirit that was going to come was his Spirit, his very wind, his life in them. But it is important to note that the verb translated “receive” is an imperative. In other words, it is a command. Jesus is telling them to receive his Spirit. But he wasn’t giving his Spirit yet. We should know that because he doesn’t give his people the Spirit by literally, physically breathing on them. He was telling them that the Spirit would be key to their ability to carry out the mission he had just given them. It would be the power of the Spirit who would enable them to have courage and carry out the mission in the face of fearful opposition.

Verse 23 has caused some controversy and consternation over the centuries. It sounds like Jesus was giving the disciples the authority to forgive sin and to judge people. However, a fundamental truth in the Bible is only God can forgive sin, and he is the judge of all. So what does this mean? Dr. Thomas Constable, an eminent scholar and professor at Dallas Seminary, said, “If people believed the gospel, the disciples were given the authority to tell these new believers that God had forgiven their sins. If they disbelieved they could tell them that God had not forgiven them.” This was a big deal because it meant they had the authority to tell people they were forgiven, loved and accepted by God through Jesus, which was a radical departure from all the laws that had gone before.

APPLICATION

All of us deal with fear. It is a reality that impacts us every day. Some fears are good. We don’t drive 100 miles an hour on the freeway for fear of having a terrible accident or getting a terrible ticket, and that’s good. Laurie and I years ago had a surf lesson, in which we both did well surfing the one foot waves, she even better than me. But I remember on the outside seeing large well over head waves that surfers were catching. Fear kept me from trying to surf that, and that was a good thing, because had I tried the results would have not been good.

We fear failure, we fear rejection, we fear what people might think of us, we fear looking bad, we fear pain, we fear loss, we fear death. While some fears are good and protect us from foolhardiness, a lot of fears have very negative effects on us. All of us can think of times when we could or should have done or said something, but didn’t because of fear.

Many years ago when I was on the staff of another church there was a time when the leadership of the church was moving toward making a decision. Everyone on the staff and the elders of the church were thinking the decision in question was a good one. I agreed, until very late in the process. There was a point when I got very uneasy with the decision. I didn’t know exactly why. I couldn’t pinpoint what bothered me, I just knew I didn’t feel good about it. I didn’t say anything about my qualms. In retrospect, I realize it was because I was afraid. I was afraid of upsetting everyone else. I was afraid of looking bad because I couldn’t give a solid reason for my uneasiness. Since I couldn’t point to a particular issue, I just let it go, thinking it was my native difficulty with making decisions. The decision was made, and it turned out to be a bad one. It took a little time, but it became apparent it was a mistake, and it ended up having some negative consequences for both the church and me personally. I ended up kicking myself because it could possibly have been avoided if I had just ignored the fear. The disciples’ fear kept them hiding out in a locked room. Our fears can keep us locked up, hiding in a room. How can we deal with fear so we can be free?

LIVE IN JESUS’ PRESENCE

Remember the idea of dimensions. Think of Jesus as living in a dimension that is very real, but we can’t see it because we are 3 dimensional beings. We are limited to those dimensions and cannot use our 3 dimensional senses to detect something that exists in that extra dimension. But Jesus is alive right now in that dimension.

That means he could be standing right next to us but in that other dimension. He would literally be right beside us, but we would not see him or hear him. That is a pretty good picture of the reality. Jesus is right with us. He said he would never leave us or abandon us. Never. That means he is right here with us this very minute. We cannot see him because we cannot detect things in that dimension where he lives. But he is very much with us.

This is the Jesus through whom all things were made. The Jesus who calmed the storm, who faced his opponents with courage, who could make food multiply miraculously, who did not flinch when he was threatened with the cross, and who conquered the grave. This is the Jesus who loved us enough to die for us and who has unlimited power. This is the Jesus who has promised us that he will bring good out of every thing that happens in our lives. What would you fear if Jesus were literally, physically standing next to you? The one who has all power is right there, and he has promised to protect you and bring good to you at all times. If that is true, what would you fear. And it is true. He is right with you, his Spirit is even inside you.

The most freeing thing in the world is to practice the presence of Jesus. It is to live every day in the reality that Jesus is right with us. When we pray we should remember that he is right there in the room with us. When we go through hard times, when we are afraid, we need to know that Jesus is right here.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace. He brings peace. Joshua 1:9, be strong and courageous. We can only do that if we are at peace. The reason we can be at peace is God says, “the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Colossians 3:15 says let the peace of Christ rule in your heart.

Our laundry room is kind of a joke. It’s about the size of a closet. It is between our dining room and the garage, so it has a door to the dining room and one to the garage. Our grandkids love the experience of going through that room. That’s because we pretend it’s a trip into space. We close both doors, turn out the light, and turn on the laundry room fan. It is completely dark and the fan noise roars, and for little kids it is kind of scary. But it feels exciting to them too. What makes it fun for them is Nana and Bapaw are with them. If we were not there it would be too scary. But with us there, they feel safe and it becomes fun. So it is with us going through life. Jesus being with us makes it exciting and calms the fear.

PURSUE THE MISSION

A second thing that can help us deal with fear is to focus on the mission God has given us. Our mission will have some variation. We are not called to be the apostle to the Gentiles the way Paul was. But we are here to do what Jesus did, to make the character of God known, by our character and our actions, and to bring good news to a lost world. We are on a mission to live in his grace and to bring that grace to every person, every situation we encounter. We are to be beacons of hope and joy that God brings us.

About 20 years ago Laurie, the kids and I visited some friends back east, and as part of the trip we went to Washington D. C. One memory from that trip sticks out for me. We went to Arlington National Cemetery, and while there we watched the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It was a powerfully solemn event. There was no talking, the only sounds were the steps of the guards and the commands they were given. The day we were there it was very cold and I observed that the guard went through his routine even though his nose was running. He just went about his business and let it run. This week Laurie showed me an article about those guards. They are from Company E of the Third Infantry Regiment, the oldest active duty regiment in the army. It has existed since 1784 and is called The Old Guard. They march back and forth in front of that tomb 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, rain or shine at a precisely defined pace and for 21 steps at a time. They have to meet rigorous requirements. They walk an exactly prescribed path in a perfect way with no variation. The first 6 months they are part of the guard unit they are not allowed to watch television or even talk to people outside. They spend all their spare time studying the notable people who are buried at the cemetery. Each day they spend 5 hours making sure their uniform is perfect. There was a picture with the article and it showed a guard marching his post in a snowstorm. There was snow piled up on top of his hat, but he never even flinched. In 2003 hurricane Isabelle roared into DC. Congress suspended meeting for 2 days because of the storm. The soldiers of the unit were told that due to the danger the hurricane presented their guard duty would be suspended. They respectfully refused to suspend their duty. They said that what they did was the highest honor one could be given in the army. So they stood their post and marched through howling winds and driving rain. They are focused on their mission, and that allows them to ignore the concerns and fears that they might have.

When we are focused on the mission Jesus has given us, it will help us ignore the fears and do what God has given us to do. As we focus on the mission we will be enabled to endure, to persevere, to act courageously in spite of potential fears.