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St. John's Episcopal Church
Easter Sunday C10 / April 4 / Luke 24:1-12

This week has been an anxious week. Indeed, there is no better word to describe this week than the word “anxious”.

The anxiety began last Sunday. It was a day that started well enough; with palm branches waving and noisemakers blaring, we marched around the church block following a bagpiper and crucifer; singing, laughing, and chatting! It was a great parade, one worthy even of Essex ~ the parade capital of Connecticut. A couple of people in town actually joined us! Of course, they disappeared when they saw where the parade was headed...

Anxiety, however, soon pierced our celebration ~ just as anxiety had pierced the celebration in Jerusalem. The people had welcomed Jesus into town with a parade, much like the one we had! But when Jesus did not begin behaving like a stereotypical king, the people grew anxious. Their anxiety increased when Jesus' behavior became seemingly erratic. For instead of overturning the tables in the Roman government, Jesus overturned tables in the temple. The people's messiah was malfunctioning and there was no better word to describe what they felt than “anxious”.

As the week progressed in length, so the people's anxiety progressed in height. On that Thursday when our Lord instituted the Last Supper, he sat with his disciples and said, “This bread is my body, this wine is my blood. Whenever you eat or drink these things do so in remembrance of me.” These words were not in the Passover script.

Words of an impending betrayal and death were not in the script, either. Thus the anxiety continued to grow and grow.

And on that very anxious night, when the authorities came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, one friend betrayed him; another friend struck out with his sword in desperation; the rest of his friends scattered, like frightened mice, into the night! Peter, Jesus' best friend, lied and denied even knowing Jesus! And the next morning, a few of the followers could be seen hiding in the crowds, peeking through the holes, catching glimpses here and there of their Master, their Teacher, and their Friend as he carried his cross to Golgotha. Their anxiety reached its crescendo as the soldiers laid Jesus upon that cross, nailed him to its beams, and hoisted him high into the air. There the soldiers and the scoffers would ridicule and mock him until he died.

There is no better word to describe what Jesus' followers felt than "anxious". Moreover, as we observed the services of the past Holy Week, we too steeped ourselves into that bitter anxiety.

I share this with you because the anxiety that the followers of Jesus felt had not risen when they woke up on Easter morning. On Easter morning, prior to the encounter that the women had with the angel, Jesus' followers and friends were still in a very anxious-ridden state of mind and heart.

That knowledge, my friends ~ that special knowledge is what makes the Easter morning story so wonderfully beautiful. For as the story begins to unfold; as the reality of the empty tomb begins to sink into their despair-ridden souls; we get to watch. We get to watch as a glorious transformation begins taking place. Jesus' followers are

transformed from being people of anxiety to being people of hope. For on Easter morning, on that festival day, God stretched out His loving arm and forever healed the world of its ultimate anxieties: the anxiety of eternal death ~ the anxiety of eternal separation from God and from one another ~ and the anxiety of having to live in a world without hope.

And so we celebrate! We celebrate God resurrecting the dead to eternal life! We celebrate our belief that, through Jesus, we can confess our sins and receive forgiveness. But we also celebrate the gift of being able to live our lives as people of hope ~ and especially so in a world that is often filled with anxious moments.

The ability that Christians have to live as people of hope is one of the key factors that differentiates Christians from the rest of the world. For instance, in the Book of Acts, Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and other Christians are beaten, put in prison, and threatened with death. And yet, while Paul and Barnabas are chained to the guards, they sing! When Paul and Silas are tightly fastened in the stocks, they pray! Although Peter fully expects to be put to death the next morning, he sleeps soundly!

Now those who did not know the resurrected Jesus; the other criminals who were in prison with them as well as the jailor charged with their security, these guys watched these Christians...in amazement. Because these followers of Jesus were not acting like “normal people” would act in these kinds of circumstances! “These are anxious times, why are you not behaving like an anxious person? What’s wrong with you?!!”

Nothing at all was wrong with them. The followers of Jesus were living their lives as people of hope. They were responding in times of anxiety with a hopeful witness. They

were meeting the despair of others with a hopeful confidence and trust in the workings of their Lord Jesus.

Now to be sure, Easter has never meant that the world would no longer experience anxious times. But what Easter does mean is that Christians no longer have to act like anxious people when those times arise. That is, Christians do not need to behave like people who have no hope.

This is so important to consider because, just like what happened in the Book of Acts, our credibility as Christian people hinges on how we behave in times of anxiety. Those who do not know Jesus and those who are living on the cusp of doubt watch what we Christians do. People notice how Christians respond in anxious times.

Will we betray each other? Will we strike out? Will we scatter and hide behind people because we don't want to be noticed? Will we lie and deny in order to protect ourselves? Will we allow someone else to incur blame and ridicule? This is how the followers of Jesus behaved before the resurrection ~ but interestingly enough, it was not how they behaved after the resurrection. Our credibility, therefore, as Christian people ~ the witness that we provide to the world as Easter people ~ as people of hope ~ hinges on how we behave in times of anxiety.

Choosing just one example among many, let's consider the current debate over the recent health care legislation. One side swears that this health care legislation is the best thing since caramel filling was put into Cadbury eggs. The other side swears that this legislation is a sign of the oncoming apocalypse of America. And both sides are

swearing at each other! No one knows for certain how this is all going to turn out! ~ which is why these times are described as being anxious.

But what has captured my interest is how people are behaving during this time of anxiety; especially people who claim to be Christians. Think back to some of the stories that you have heard. Think back to some of the stories that you have read. My hunch is that we have been reading and hearing the same news. People in our country have been demonizing each other over this issue. People have spat on each other. People have thrown bricks through windows and have resorted to the racist antics hearkening back to the days of the Civil Rights movement. People have been threatening each other with bodily harm. Friends for life have chosen to sacrifice their friendship because of their different positions. According to a poll conducted last week, a little less than 50% blame the Democrats for the vandalism and threats of violence; and a little less than 50% blame the Republicans. Thus it can be said that the behavior of some people on both sides of the health care issue has not identified them as being people of hope. Their behavior has identified them as being people of anxiety. They are anxious people living in anxious times, and despair ~ not hope ~ is controlling their behavior. Fear ~ not hope ~ is driving their behavior. And my suspicion is that more than just a few involved are Christians.

Now health care is just one example out of the many that we could talk about and examine. There are many issues and many different and difficult situations that are being faced every day. There is anxiety in the world. And there are going to be issues and situations in which people are going to disagree and disagree strongly.

But there is a difference. There is a difference between responding to anxiety by striking out, by lying, by denying, by running away, by ridiculing, by threatening death ~ there is a difference between behaving like that and responding in times of anxiety with the fruits of the Spirit: that is, with self-control ~ with patience ~ with kindness ~ with gentleness ~ with love, joy, and peace and yes ~ with hope. It's fine for Christian people to disagree in times of anxiety. It's fine for Christian people to be concerned in anxious times, even deeply so. But it is not fine for Christians to behave like anxious people; to behave as people who have no hope.

May hope, therefore, be the Easter witness that you and I start offering the world on this Easter Sunday. May our friends and may the members of our families, when anxious times arise, may they be as surprised as the women who visited Jesus' empty tomb to discover that our lives, too, have become empty of anxious-ridden behaviors. And in its place, may they find in us the hope and the joy that God has instilled in us as a result of the resurrection promise; as a result of God's healing us of our deepest anxieties; and as a result of our desire to serve Him this day and forevermore as Easter people ~ as people of hope.