

## Easter 4 – Year C

Two weeks ago, I began my homily by saying, “We have been here too often before.” And here we are again. On April 30, at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, a lone shooter killed two students and wounded several others. Riley Howell knocked the gunman down and was killed in the process. This past Tuesday afternoon, May 7<sup>th</sup>, at STEM School in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, two shooters wounded eight students and killed Kendrick Castillo as he rushed one of the gunmen and thus helped save the lives of his classmates.

It bothers me that school and church shootings are becoming so frequent as to become “common.” When things become “common,” we can become inured to them. We can stop feeling. I don’t want to go there. I don’t want *us* to go there, even though it is a common defense mechanism that our psyche’s use to protect us from being overwhelmed. When it all becomes too much, we withdraw, or shut down, or block things out, or find ways to numb ourselves. It feels, in many ways, like grief.

But if we look again at what we have been hearing in the scriptures, we find some insight in how to deal with being surrounded by loss and injustice and fear. Remember Mary Magdalene – going to the tomb, ready to anoint and caress the dead body of Jesus, then ready to face the empty tomb with all its unanswered questions. And finding there, in the ‘valley of death’, the one who called her by name – “Mary.” Sometimes all we can do is sit with the pain of it all and wait until we hear our name called, until – like Tabitha in our first reading – we see another who reaches out a hand to us, calls our name, and bids us to get up. And sometimes, my friends, we are called to be the one to go to another and help them up.

But remember that Peter, who acts with boldness and certain faith in today’s reading from Acts, is the same man who left the empty tomb and went home, who gathered with others in a locked room – out of fear.

Episcopal priest and Native Hawaiian Jazzy Bostock says, “We, too, are motivated by fear. And sometimes, we are motivated by fear in ways we don’t even realize ourselves. In fact, one of the pitfalls of fear is the way it sneaks in, manifesting as something else – as self-protectiveness, or concern for home security, or about keeping what belongs to us – these are all fear, dressed up.”

Fear dressed up. Yes, this unrelenting stream of violence and hatred can lead us there – to fear that shows itself in a desire to protect ourselves and everything we think belongs to us from whatever or whomever we think might try to harm us or take our stuff, our way of life, to take what is ours. Fear, dressed up, can make us listen to voices that are not the voice of the Good Shepherd. Fear can make us not trust ourselves – not believe that we have seen the resurrected Christ, that we have recognized him in the breaking of the bread, that our hearts have burned within us. Fear can make us forget the still, small voice within calling us, “My Beloved.”

*Rachel Held Evans wrote, “When you can’t trust your own God-given conscience to tell you what’s right, or your own God-given mind to tell you what’s true, you lose the capacity to engage the world in any meaningful, authentic way, and you become an easy target for authoritarian movements eager to exploit that vacuity for their gain.”*

In the context of our Gospel for today, when we don’t trust the voice of God, the voice of the Shepherd speaking within us, we become an easy target for fear. Now some might say, how can you know the voice of God? Oh, I think we know the voice of God. It’s the voice that calls us out of fear into trust, it’s the voice that revives us, that calls us by name, that calls us to the table with even those who trouble us. It’s the voice that speaks mercy. And we recognize it even when we don’t want to hear it.

Priest Michael Renninger says it this way: “After 25 years of ministry, I have begun to notice a few patterns – patterns which help me discern whether I am hearing the voice the Lord, or whether the message is coming from somewhere else. What have I learned? + If the voice you hear encourages you to trust...then it’s probably the Lord. If the voice you hear leads you to cynicism, then it’s probably an imposter. + If the voice you hear calls you to be generous and self-transcending, then it’s from the Lord. If the voice calls you to selfishness, self-centeredness, it’s an imposter. + If you hear an invitation to spend more of your life focused on others, to measure your success by the difference you make in someone else’s life, it’s probably from the Lord. +If the voice you hear calls you to be a peacemaker, a justice-doer, a hope-giver, it’s from the Lord. + If you hear an encouragement to treasure life, set aside angers, forgive and forgive some more, it’s from the Lord.”

Yes, sometimes the voice of God speaks things we’d rather not hear. The reading from the book of Revelation, with its wonderful hymn of praise, speaks of “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” – and not everyone in that multitude matches our image of who is loved by God. But the point is that each person, every individual was created by God and is loved by God. That means those who think and look like us, and those who don’t.

Elizabeth Palmer, writing in Christian Century, says: “God’s grace is far more expansive than we would ever wish it to be, and it’s only because of that surplus that we too are among the saved.”

We are living in a world where it is no longer startling to hear that there has been another shooting, a world where the voices of violence and hatred engender fear, fear dressed up in many different ways, designed to separate us and to lead us into death. How did we end up here?

Remember what we heard from the prophet Baruch read at Easter Vigil: “Why is it, O Israel, why is it that you are in the land of your enemies, that you are growing old in a foreign country, that you are defiled with the dead, that you are counted among those in Hades? You have forsaken the fountain of wisdom. If you had walked in the way of God, you would be living in peace for ever...” We need to walk the way of God. We need to listen for the voice of God, to trust the Shepherd, and to respond by reaching out and calling to one another, “Get up!” and offering our hand. We need to shepherd well those in our care, so that fear no longer leads to violence.

There is a sung translation of Psalm 23 – our psalm today that is comforting to so many - that speaks to me perhaps because of its unfamiliar translation: “Shepherd me, O God, *beyond* my fears, beyond my *wants*, from death into life.”

May it be so.

- [Acts 9:36-43](#)
- [Revelation 7:9-17](#)
- [John 10:22-30](#)
- [Psalm 23](#)