

FEAR AND FAITH IN THE FIELDS OF OUR HEARTS

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This morning's sermon is in some ways a sermon that many of you have already preached this week. The lessons are familiar, and those of you who occupied pulpits across the churches of the land hear still the echo of the way the Gospel sounded in your parishes. And those of you who were occupying other roles in those parishes heard that same Gospel. It echoes its Alleluias and its amazing connections between the wounds that our Lord shows as the basis for his first "Peace be with you" and the wounds that he again shows to elicit from Thomas the great confession "My Lord, My God." As we gather these days to consider the "wheat arising green" on "the fields of our hearts," we come as Gospel-agriculturists to tend the growth, to watch, to smile, to celebrate as Christ's peace grows in our midst, as that faith and its confession rises and wells up and so bears witness to those within earshot of the words it takes in us. That is the ground for doing what we have done once already this week, preaching and hearing this Gospel.

We're framed today by two other realities. We read the Thomas Gospel this year with the echoes of Mark and Mark's Easter book ringing steadily for us. We read that amazing Easter story: the women coming, anxious, frightened, sad to the tomb, being amazed at what they saw, a rolled-away stone, an empty cave, and that young man in white baptismal robe saying what needed to be said, "Do not be amazed!" and announcing the good news, news that of course Mark writes from start to finish, the beginnings of that news of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, but ending so ironically in fear and silence. Having heard and seen, "they said nothing to anyone; they were afraid, you see."

There is an echo for that fear as the other framing reality for our celebration today, for today in the calendar for our Jewish brothers and sisters and many Christian churches as well, is Memorial of the Holocaust, *Yom Hashoah*. We remember the fear, the terror as millions were arrested, interned, starved, brutalized, killed, burned, and their ashes scattered over the European fields and forests. That is why, brothers and sisters, I am tempted, tempted to do as Mark describes the women: having seen and having heard to say nothing; for I am

afraid, you see. Afraid that I still live in a culture of fear and death. Afraid of the ways that I do not wish the new world to be. Afraid of the ways that we still cultivate death and the fear of death. How many thousands of Iraqi deaths have our soldiers cultivated this year? I am afraid of the way we clutch so tightly familiar things that we think can nourish. Afraid that we make ourselves the protectors of the Gospel and doctrine and Church and tradition. Afraid to confess with Thomas that it is that God and Lord, that Gospel, big enough and strong enough and good enough to defend us and to quiet our fears. Yet we cultivate death and the fear of death in all the ways we seek to show that we somehow have power and control over others. We cultivate death and the fear of death when minds are fried and brain cells are ruined and God's creation is poisoned by what are euphemistically called "controlled substances." I'm afraid because we live in a culture of death and the fear of death as we seek to manipulate one another, and so rejoice that we are the manipulators and not the manipulatees. And we find all kinds of sophisticated ways to hang on to a little bit of "manipulative moxie" so that somehow we can still control and so keep back a little bit, a little more, a little longer, the great god Death whom we fear.

You need to work with me now. If you have traveled in Europe and visited the memorials of the camps that can be seen, if you have walked along or paged through the photographs from the museums, you can recall a few vignettes. At the gate, false promises in iron letters: at one camp, *Arbeit macht frei*, Work will set you free (interesting promise, that one); at another, *Jedem das Seine*, Everybody gets what they've got coming to them (death, starvation, genocide—a mockery of the justice the phrase implies). In the background a chimney, a few ovens, the doors still marked with the name of the firm in Nürnberg that manufactured them. At Dachau, at the museum end of the camp, on a wall and in many languages the declaration, *Nie wieder*, Never Again!

I must try to read an excerpt from *Night*, by Elie Wiesel. Now, the associations between this vignette (as the older Wiesel writes, remembering what he saw as a youngster in the camp) and the stories that Christians have told in these Great Three Days are more than I can handle. But I will try, and you must try to listen. He writes:

One day, when we came back from work, we saw three gallows rearing up in the assembly place, three black crows. Roll call. SS all around us, machine guns trained: the traditional ceremony. Three victims in chains—and one of them the little servant, the sad-eyed angel.

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him. This time the Lagerkapo refused to act as executioner, three SS replaced him.

Three victims mounted together onto the chairs.

The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

'Long live liberty!' cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

Behind me I heard a voice, 'Where is God? Where is He?'

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs were tipped over.

Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon the sun was setting.
'Bare your heads!' yelled the Lagerkapo. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.
'Cover your heads!'

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive.

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed. Behind me the voice, 'Where is God now?'

And I heard a voice within me answer him, 'Where, where is God? Here is God—that is God hanging here on this gallows....'

I am afraid, afraid of what it means to bear the name of Christ and as a Christian to hear this story, with its three instruments of execution, with its silent dying victim, and with its wondrous confession that in the death of the *servant*, as Wiesel calls him, the voice can say, "There is God." But for me to say that now, as a Christian with a German surname, into the ears of Jewish friends, that is almost too much. I am afraid to say of the one I call Lord, dying in the midst of three execution instruments, with only a cry (as Mark would have it) of dereliction on his lips, afraid that I cannot find the words of Thomas to say into the ears of those around me, "There is God, my Lord and my God."

Into this ground there has been spilled the blood of millions. And into this ground has been spilled the blood of One as well. In His dying, and so in their dying and finally also in our dying, blood is shed to make fertile, somehow, the soil. So in our fear, sisters and brothers, we look for ways to say, "My Lord, my God," so that all may hear and all may know that God is there, doing death to death. In Christ God is not just announcing, but *acting* to end that culture of death and the fear of death that we so anachronistically try to preserve. God is hanging there, to be done with death.

Now, on the eighth day, to the terrified ones Jesus comes with scarred hands, a side open to the divine heart of love, first to say to all our fears, "Peace be with you," and then on the ground of that peace to say, "I send you as the Father has sent me"; that you, too, may have those marks; that you, too, may have your side opened to show God's heart of love; that you, too, may shed blood to make fertile a soil that may produce that crop of faith and confession that sings God's praises with Thomas, (as my friend and colleague Fred Niedner has taught us to say) "Our twin."

Here, here you shall know. Reach out your hands to take the paschal victim. See those wounds. Know that heart of love. Risk the fearful, awesome, wondrous, new and glorious truth: "This is my Lord and my God." Reach out for the bread and the cup, for the body broken and the blood shed—all for you, that in the fields of your hearts, like wheat arising green, may come the word of faith, "My Lord, and my God." And be no more afraid.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.