

John 20:19-23

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"Alone and Afraid in the Dark" October 28, 1990

Text: *"...the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews,...."*

One of my favorite quotes comes from William Shakespeare's MacBeth. *"By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes."* How appropriate for this time of year as we prepare this day and week for the onslaught of trick-or-treaters wearing masks and we hear stories of ghosts, witches, and goblins which fill the air with a breath of fear.

"By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes." I truly began to understand Shakespeare's curious link between fear and the tingling sensation, which feels like the pricking of many tiny little needles, in one's thumbs the night our second son Danny was born. Just before 3 AM on February 8, 1988 my wife Mary shook me awake and indicated, very calmly, labor had started. The tingling in my thumbs began and quickly spread to all ten fingers. We were well prepared and on the rural Iowa road to the hospital, some twenty-five miles away, by 3:10 AM. Nothing to fear, though, because our first son Ben took ten long and hard hours to get into this world. I drove carefully at 50 miles an hour through the dark of an early winter morning.

Fear can be a debilitating thing. It can be like sand poured into an engine. Fear can make everything stop. It numbs the mind and immobilizes the soul. Being alone and afraid is even worse. For when we are alone, we have no point of reference in the form of another person with which to gauge our feelings of fear. Some of Jesus' disciples gathered in an upper room; a dark and windowless room behind closed and locked doors. They were afraid of what was to come next. They feared the same fate Jesus had on the cross. They were frozen in terror and dared not take Christ's message out into a hostile world. They were alone in their own thoughts of self condemnation because they all, to some degree, failed their master in his hour of greatest need.

Driving a car on a rural Iowa road in the wee hours of the morning is very close to being alone. Sure, there are the yard lights from area farms, but they are strangely distant and aloof of my peculiar situation. Not even half way to the hospital and labor pains are very close together. I feel alone and afraid driving through the night. A wife in heavy labor is not good company. She seems, to me at least, to be doing well. But the honest anxieties she broadcasts about doing this in a moving Oldsmobile begin to worry me. The needle on the speedometer glides up to 55 m.p.h. The tingling sensation is now all over my hands as they grip the wheel. Somewhere between 10 and 11 miles out her water broke.

It is ironic in today's world of mass communications, mass transit, telephones, television, and global awareness that so many people are living lonely and frightened lives. Are you one of these people? I know that sometimes I am. The Disciples in the upper room were not unique in their fear. The story of their little band cowering in the gloom and protected only by the walls and locked door of the upper room has been played and replayed throughout history and is still happening today.

The early Christians, who met and worshiped in the catacombs time and again for three centuries before Christianity found the freedom to exist in the Roman world, had to hide their faith or suffer severe persecution. In like fashion, our Congregational founders, the separatists, met secretly in homes expressing their religious beliefs always fearing capture and persecution by the ruling powers of England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Courageous followers of Christ have faced many fears throughout the ages in an effort to continue Christ's Good News and bring God's light of truth to darkened corners of the world. But not so with Christ's disciples when they gathered in the upper room. The passage in John does not tell us they are worshiping God or praising the Father for the mighty works and magnificent love of Jesus. The doors were not shut to allow them worshipful privacy, but *"for fear of the Jews."* They were, it appeared, trapped, alone, in a fear so great it may have seemed even God almighty could not remove them from the fix they were in.

Traveling 60 m.p.h. and at five miles from the hospital with the prickling sensation traveling all the way down my forearms to my elbows Mary announces, with some emotion, the baby's head is beginning to make it's final approach. I think she used other words to describe this, but I can't remember what they were. She tells me it is time for her to push. Thinking back on our first birth at which pushing did not come until the last half hour of ten grueling hours, I decided not to believe her and began muttering, *"No, no, no,...you can't push yet. What would the doctor say?"* Fear had paralyzed my mind. There was no doctor in this mobile delivery room. I distinctly remember Mary beginning to pray. *"Good idea!"* I thought, *"You pray and I'll drive."* The tinglies rushed up my arms, over my shoulders and across my chest. Pretty soon there were going to be three of us in that car. My car. Which used to be my father's Oldsmobile. I remember wondering if he wanted to have it back. The lights of Spencer, Iowa, our destination, loomed ahead as beacons of hope. I saw a sign saying reduce speed ahead and our speedometer crept up to 65 m.p.h. as we passed it.

According to legend Memmius was a spy in the days of the last and worst of the persecutions under Roman Emperor Diocletian. It was his work to root out the Christians in their secret places of worship and bring them before the judges and the persecutors. Memmius was engaged in this infamous task in the catacombs one day and working his way down a narrow passage he came across a small band of Christians worshiping. The candles were burning at the altar and the priest was delivering a message. An opportunity was open to Memmius at that moment to join in worship and bow before almighty God and receive everlasting light. But, as the tale is told, he hardened his heart and was made

bewildered by the dazzling lights of the altar candles. From that time on, it is told, Memmius wandered throughout the catacombs alone and in the dark waiting for some unwary visitor to take him by the hand and lead him from the darkness to the light.

The disciples in the upper room waited on the first Easter night so long ago. For what, they probably were not sure. Capture or arrest would seem most likely. We, in this age, are often waiting in want of something to lift us up from our moments of fear or despair. We, at times, can be trapped in our own little upper rooms behind closed and locked doors. I know that in this sanctuary today there are those who feel trapped by financial difficulties. Others face the fear of loneliness as friends and loved ones either die or move away. Some of you are looking for better career opportunities, while others face the pains of medical affliction. And many of us just wish we had the time or the know-how to relax a little bit and enjoy the life we've been given rather than keeping busy just for the sake of busyness, because we don't know any better. All of us, from time to time, are like Memmius waiting for that someone or something to guide us from the darkness we are in toward the light.

Things out of our control happen to us all the time. It is not always easy to call upon God or even think of God when fear grips the heart. The disciples may have had a hard time praising the wonders of God as they huddled together reeling from the shock of Jesus' trial and death. I was trapped in an upper room of high anxiety not by my choice. This upper room of mine was traveling at nearly twice the 35 mile an hour speed limit most normal people use on Spencer, Iowa streets. The time was approximately 3:40 AM and I felt relatively safe running lights of all different colors. I began hoping for bizarre forms of miracles like an alien spaceship coming just in time to beam mother and child to the emergency room. Fear for the safety of Mary and the baby gripped me totally and though I cannot remember all the details, I am sure that the prickly sensation ran through my entire body at this time.

One or two blocks from the hospital and Mary firmly told me to honk the horn to let them know we're coming. A thought ran through my mind. A nice pastoral, ministerial type thought which would not allow me to honk the horn at 3:45 AM in a residential and hospital zone. Mary implored me to honk the horn. I gave it a couple of little beeps as I parked the car on the emergency ramp. The miracle I waited for happened, but not quickly. There were people in there gazing at us through the big windows. A middle aged couple who had just brought in an elderly parent. Two paramedics lounging around and one Emergency Room Nurse.

I jumped out of the car, waved my hands up and down like a jumping jack, and shouted through a big window, "*She's having the baby right now!*" A paramedic slowly emerged with a wheelchair, zigged and zagged his way down the handicapped ramp, and opened Mary's car door. He took one look at my wife's condition, slammed the door shut, waved his hands up and down like a jumping jack, and shouted through the window, "*She's having the baby right now!*" This brought a whole lot of attention to the situation. In a few minutes, a

nurse from the baby department came down and cleared a path to Mary. She got there just in time to catch the baby. Everything was alright. The nurse told Mary she did well. She did everything she was supposed to do. I had a short moment to thank God and be at peace.

When Jesus suddenly appeared to his disciples in the closed upper room he greeted them with the words, "*Peace be with you.*" Within moments, the story tells us, the disciples were glad. Even through the close walls and the locked door of the upper room the love and fellowship of Christ penetrates the gloominess of fear and despair. They no longer needed to feel alone for God through Christ was with them and the Holy Spirit was given them from his breath. Just as important as anything they received from Christ were his instructions to continue his ministry in the world. He gave them the power and direction to go beyond the closed doors of that fearful place and relieve the fear and loneliness of others.

This same miracle can happen for us today. On the lonely rural highway in Iowa, Mary and I were not alone. God was with us. We each did what we had to do to make it through the traumatic moment. We were not alone when help burst upon us at the hospital and through the helping, confident, and caring hands of others we found relative peace. For that moment in our lives, a happy ending resulted. Had things been different, something could have happened to Danny or to Mary and a new and even bleaker upper room would have been created. For many people, such a room exists. But, no matter how tightly we shut and lock the door, in an attempt to keep fear out, the love of Christ can enter in, if we allow him, and even in the most dire circumstances God can bring us peace.

Though life's power sometimes thrusts us into positions or places where we find ourselves alone and afraid in the dark, there is no need to linger there while the life and power of God is working in this world. God's messengers of love and service are hard at work and available to us. Many of them are here with us, right now, in this room. Today is a good day to begin to break free from the lonely and fearful confines of our upper rooms. Peace be with you. Amen.