

“No Turning Back”

Rev. David Gregory

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Easter 2



First reading

John 20:19-21

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, “Peace to you.” Then he showed them his hands and side. The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were exuberant. Jesus repeated his greeting: “Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you.”

Second reading

Fear

Khalil Gibran

It is said that before entering the sea
a river trembles with fear.

She looks back at the path she has traveled,
from the peaks of the mountains,
the long winding road crossing forests and villages.

And in front of her,
she sees an ocean so vast,
that to enter
there seems nothing more than to disappear forever.

But there is no other way.
The river can not go back.

Nobody can go back.
To go back is impossible in existence.

The river needs to take the risk
of entering the ocean
because only then will fear disappear,
because that’s where the river will know
it’s not about disappearing into the ocean,
but of becoming the ocean.

I'm David Gregory, with a message for you today from the Community Congregational Church in Tiburon, California. I am coming to you on the Second Sunday of Easter, which this year converges with the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, just three days from now. We all know Earth Day as a yearly observance involving large public gatherings, educational offerings and demonstrations, all designed to heighten global awareness of environmental concerns. This year it takes on a new layer of meaning that none of us saw coming.

In spite of the resurgence of nationalism in many parts of the western world, the current pandemic makes us aware—once again—that we are first and foremost a global community, and like it or not, we are forced to acknowledge our need for global solutions. It is ironic that on this Earth Day we are in a crisis that is environmental, that is, it's in our environment, and has no respect for any border. At a time when we appear to be so separated, when we are constructing fear-driven walls both literal and figurative, a pandemic is now drawing us strangely together at a much deeper level than we ever thought possible. Our separateness is just an illusion, something we've known well in our spiritual practices, but haven't always acknowledged in our institutional ones. We have long treasured the uniqueness of our own church or spiritual community, but suddenly we are thrust into one that is much larger, more diverse, and far more geographically vast.

I'd like to suggest that Mother Earth has had enough, and that this time around, she'd really like for us to shut up and listen. We are part of her, and we were never created to go it alone. It is our fear that drives us into separate camps, and perhaps the naming of that fear is the key that will lead us through the door to something far better than we've ever known before. It was fear that had the followers of Jesus locked in a room together. We are told that this happened after the crucifixion, but today's gospel says that they were still doing this after the resurrection. And the first words from Jesus's mouth when he stood among them was "Fear not; peace be unto you."

Here we have a biblical metaphor that we are undoubtedly living in some form each and every day. They were locked away inside a room because they were afraid of the retribution they could suffer at the hands of those who crucified Jesus. We're afraid of the suffering we could unknowingly inflict on others. They were afraid that this promised revolution that Jesus proclaimed, the one he called the Kingdom of God, would never come to be, and that they were going to have to go back to their separate lives, trying to scratch out an existence that would keep them from starving. We're afraid of the collapse of our social systems, and the inabilities of our governments to provide a place where we can recover from the fallout of this pandemic—physically, economically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

To us, these words might feel a little shallow at the moment. If one were to say to us, "Fear not," we might easily respond with, "That's easier said than done." "Stop feeling that way!" someone might say. And we might say, "I can't automatically stop a feeling that just is." We have often been prone to labeling our emotions like peace, joy, and love as *good*, and other ones like anger, anxiety, and fear as *bad*. I would say to you that no feelings are good or bad; they are simply a means of getting us to take notice of where we are, and to heighten our desire to make new choices because of what we feel. Emotions are like the indicator lights on a dashboard telling us that something needs attention. We might need to slow down, to stop for gas, or to turn on our headlights. The fear we feel today is one of our indicator lights. An unacknowledged indicator light is never a good thing. And putting the car in reverse will not solve an empty gas tank, or fix a headlamp. The only possible solution is found in a forward direction, and this may be one of the greatest lessons of this moment in our collective history.

Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese artist, poet, and philosopher of the early twentieth century, has gifted us with a beautiful poem entitled simply, *Fear*. In his poem, this river, personified as a fearful being, finds itself flowing ever closer to the vast unknown ocean, not knowing who it will be without its tributaries and riverbanks, without its spring-fed mountain streams and melting snow caps. But it cannot go back. The poet says it this way:

But there is no other way.

The river can not go back.

Nobody can go back.

To go back is impossible in existence.

The river needs to take the risk

of entering the ocean

because only then will fear disappear . . .

This is true of us individually, and it is true in all of our collective spaces, including our ecclesiastical ones. The institution we call church is never going to be the same. The church in America will never be the same. The United Church of Christ will never be the same. The Presbyterian Church will never be the same. The Methodist Church will never be the same. The Episcopalians, the Baptists, the Mormons, the Pentecostals and the fundamentalists, the progressives and the liberals, none of them will ever be the same.

We are looking at an ocean that is the digital revolution, one that we've been trickling toward with a great deal of resistance, for a very long time. But now, suddenly, we're almost to the delta, and we're afraid we're going to be lost, that our familiar riverbanks will be forgotten and that we will no longer know who or what we are. But we cannot go back. It doesn't matter how afraid we are. We enter into a risk that is unavoidable, because as the poet says, only then will fear disappear.

For several years now, our congregational community has spent time and energy and money in processes designed to move us forward and to prosper at a time when many traditional religious settings are in decline and retreat. Our successes have been moderate, but they are also incomplete.

If we had been able to continue in that space of moderate success, eventually we would fail, for without a large enough influx of new and younger people with new ideas, good energy and the means to support it financially, the church as we have known it will die with us. But now, all of a sudden, we are presented with this involuntary opportunity to expand our reach, and with that expansion has come an engagement with up to double our usual numbers. Our Sunday videos are being shared across a myriad of platforms, emails, newsletters, and other digital means, engaging people who might never enter our physical doors.

The day will come when we will be able to reopen our building, but when that happens, it will be a different community that will be in attendance. The digital gathering will come right in the doors with us. God willing, we'll be adding technology that will enable us to do that. Some of our programming will fall away; some of it will be enhanced; some new things will occur to us that we would never have dreamed in any other context.

Change can be exciting, but can also be frightening. And our fear will tempt us to try to put everything back in its place, and to go back to life as it was before the pandemic, but to go back is truly impossible. We really are in this together. We sing together, pray together, we laugh together; we also fear together; and now we can co-create something entirely new together.

So, stay tuned. Fear not. And . . . Peace be with you.