

Easter 3b: 4/18/21  
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Here's a timely line from today's psalm (4:6):  
"Many are saying, 'Oh, that we might see better times!'  
Lift up the light of your countenance upon us, O Lord."

Or how about this question from today's gospel:  
"Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

Jesus asked that question of shell-shocked disciples late the first Easter.  
But it's as apt for us on this Third Sunday of Easter 2021,  
the second year in which we've celebrated this day through screens  
during a global pandemic.

And we're the lucky ones.  
By virtue of being here it means we're not among the more than half-a million of  
our fellow citizens who've died from COVID19.  
By virtue of having the time and being able to be together via a device or TV,  
it likely means that we've managed to get through this year  
with our lives and livelihoods somewhat intact.  
We are, most of us, in this context the lucky ones.

And yet, that question still resonates:  
Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?

You may know from your own life experience,  
that there are at least two kinds of anxiety.  
There's acute anxiety in response to a specific crisis – anything from a health  
emergency, a job loss or, having to do something difficult or new.  
We've all experienced acute anxiety at some (or many) points in our lives by now.  
And we can certainly recognize that those who've lost loved ones or livelihoods,  
or suffered serious cases of COVID,  
fall into this category of acute anxiety or trauma.

But there's also *chronic anxiety* – a stress so pervasive and long-lasting and subtle  
that we may not even know we're experiencing it.  
It's just become part of the air we breathe.

No matter what else may happen in our lives, we're already starting at a heightened level of anxiety.

After more than a year of pandemic,  
more than a year of quarantine and disruption,  
of constantly reinventing how we go about the simplest tasks,  
of uncertainty about the future,  
well, that sounds like a recipe for chronic anxiety.

Sadly, statistics bear this out. Substance abuse, suicide, and gun sales are all up. Calls to the federal emergency hotline are up a thousand percent. But you already know this deep in your gut. This is the tragic toll of a prolonged once-in-a-lifetime (we pray) trauma.

Why are we frightened, with doubts arising in our hearts? *How could we not be?*

I love how Jesus asks this question so matter of factly in today's gospel. He doesn't ask *if* they're frightened or *if* they're filled with doubt. Jesus knows they are. And he knows we are too. Jesus isn't shocked by anything we may think, feel or do. He's seen it all and loves us even so. And he's there to love and lead us through the fog of chronic anxiety. We may not even realize that's where we are. But Jesus does. It's all right there in today's gospel.

Jesus is unperturbed to find them startled and terrified, frightened and doubting. He doesn't scapegoat or shame or call them out for it. But he doesn't ignore it either. Instead, he names it. He lets them feel what they need to feel. He enters into it with them, sharing their vulnerability and showing his wounds, his hands and feet scarred from the nails and hard wood of the cross.

Then, in a particularly poignant line of scripture, it says they felt "joy" even as they "were disbelieving and still wondering." What a complex and conflicted soup of human emotion! I wouldn't be surprised if that's how many of us feel once we're finally able to gather and resume some semblance of "normal".

Joy, yes. But disbelief (doubt) and lingering questions too.  
That chronic anxiety we've been stewing all year  
will spill over into whatever comes next.

But again, Jesus is unflappable.  
Once their most basic human needs are met in the form of food and hospitality,  
Jesus grounds them in his words.  
He takes the time to open their minds to scripture.  
He promises to be with them wherever they go to all nations.

And then, to these startled, terrified, frightened, doubtful, joyful, disbelieving,  
still wondering people, Jesus says: "You are witnesses."

And they were.  
Startled, terrified, frightened, doubtful, joyful, disbelieving,  
and still wondering, they were witnesses.  
They were the witnesses  
who passed down this story of God's healing love in Christ Jesus to us,  
startled, terrified, frightened, doubtful, joyful, disbelieving,  
and still wondering as we may be  
today and for some time to come.

May we be as gentle with one another – and ourselves.  
May we fear not to name the battered state, the chronic anxiety,  
in which we find ourselves, our families, our parish, and  
most other aspects of our lives.  
May we honestly share our wounds and vulnerabilities with  
one another, trusting that therein lies our deepest grace.  
May we ground ourselves, together, in God's word Jesus.  
May we serve in his name all people, all nations, all creation.

For we are witnesses.  
Even though we be frightened with doubts arising in our hearts,  
and haunted by anxiety whether acute or chronic or both,  
we are witnesses because the love of Jesus makes us so.

So be it: Amen.