The title of today’s sermon, “Panic Room,” has nothing to do with the IRS forms some of you still have at home, waiting to mail. Surely you have your papers in order. However, it is about fear.  In 1947 Vladimir Zenchenkov, a government accounting clerk in Russia, returned home from a night of drinking to discover that he had misplaced 400 ration cards owned by his boss.  This was not a good thing. Ration cards were a prized commodity in postwar Russia. With Siberia beckoning, Mrs. Zenchenkov advised her husband to make himself scarce. The next day she told his coworkers that he had run off with another woman. For the next twenty-two years, according to newspaper reports, the terrified Zenchenkov never once left his house.

In 1969 Mrs. Zenchenkov died, and her husband went to the local police station to turn himself in. He was told that the ration cards had turned up in his desk drawer the day after he disappeared in 1947. (1)  It’s amazing what fear will do to us, isn’t it?

It's amazing to look back on the popularity of advice columnist Ann Landers. Did you know that as she was dying in 2002, she received 10,000 letters a day. She was asked what was the most common problem people write about, without hesitation she said “Fear.”  Fear comes in many forms.  Louis Pasteur is reported to have had such an irrational fear of dirt and infection that he refused to shake hands.  President and Mrs. Benjamin Harrison were so intimidated by the newfangled electricity installed in the White House they didn’t dare touch the switches. If there were no servants around to turn off the lights when the Harrisons went to bed, they slept with them on. (3)  It is said that the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin so feared for his safety that his residence in Moscow contained eight bedrooms. Each night Stalin chose a bedroom at random to sleep in to ensure that no one knew exactly where he was located.

Dr. Phillip McGraw, popularly known as Dr. Phil on his daily talk show, helps people get their lives together.  Our everyday choices, says Dr. Phil, separate the sane and successful from the frustrated and failing. “The important thing to understand,” he concludes, “is that the number one catalyst in the choices we make is fear.”

It’s true. The number one problem that causes many of us to make wrong choices is that we are afraid--afraid of what our friends will think, afraid of ridicule, afraid of failing, afraid of being hurt. Even the disciples of Jesus gave into fear.

Robert Goddard wrote the book titled “Panic Room.”  Meg Altmann is a recently divorced woman who is pleased to find a brownstone apartment in New York City for her and her daughter. It is to be the place from which they would begin life anew. But their joy turns to terror when three thugs break into their new home. The thugs are seeking millions of dollars hidden there by the former owner. To escape, the woman and her daughter retreat to the home’s one unique feature--a self-contained concrete room--the panic room. The panic room features a steel door which cannot be penetrated, video monitors and a loudspeaker system. Their intention is simple. They will hunker down in safety until the robbers go away.

There is much more to the story. But Meg and her daughter sought safety behind the panic room’s steel door, Jesus’ disciples, after witnessing their Master’s crucifixion, retreated to their own spiritual panic room. Fear gripped them—the same people who had arrested, convicted, and crucified Jesus now hunted them. Behind closed doors, they huddled, seeking refuge.

The Disciples figured they would hunker down for a while, wait out the danger, and then when the uproar over Jesus had passed they would slip out of Jerusalem and back to their old lives. They probably figured that once the crisis was over, they could go back to the way things used to be.” (4)

If the risen Christ had not appeared to these frightened disciples behind those closed doors and calmed their fearful hearts, you have to wonder whether they would ever have amounted to anything at all. They were down, disillusioned, doubting. Even though some of them had already encountered Christ risen from the dead, they were still stunned by the events of the preceding days. The last thing they expected was that this would be day that would bring greatness out of each of them.

IT BEGAN WHEN CHRIST MADE HIMSELF REAL TO THEM.  There they were with the doors locked in fear, when Christ suddenly came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Was he greeting them with a blessing--“Peace be with you!”--or was he trying to calm them down? “Peace be with you!” There’s not much he could do with them while they were still cowering in the shadows.

We know that Jesus’ second most common command was “to Love.” What was his first? “Don’t be afraid.” But they were afraid. It was all too much for them. So, what did he do? He said to them, “Peace be with you!” And he showed them his hands and side. He wanted them to know it was really him. John tells us that “the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”

Here’s the importance of his showing them his hands and his side. The greatest problem that the disciples had was the greatest problem that you and I have--it was a lack of faith. What is fear? It is a lack of faith. Faith in ourselves, perhaps, or faith in others. But ultimately, it is a lack of faith in God. If we truly were able to completely trust God and God’s love for us, couldn’t we handle anything that comes our way?

Perhaps you are familiar with the name Rollo May. He is a famous therapist and author whose work many young people first encounter in college. Among his many books is one titled, My Quest for Beauty. The book tells of Rollo May’s lifelong search for beauty, and among the experiences he recounts is a visit to Mt. Athos, a peninsula of Greece inhabited exclusively by monks.  Rollo May was beginning to recover from a nervous breakdown when he visited Mt.Athos. He happened to arrive just as the monks were celebrating Greek Orthodox Easter, a ceremony thick with symbolism, thick with beauty. Icons were everywhere. Incense hung in the air. And at the height of that service the priest gave everyone present three Easter eggs, wonderfully decorated and wrapped in a veil. “Christos Anesti!” he said--“Christ is Risen!” Each person there, including Rollo May, responded according to custom, “He is risen indeed!” Here’s what’s interesting. Rollo May was not a believer. But he writes in his book, “I was seized then by a moment of spiritual reality: what would it mean for our world,” asks Rollo May, “if He had truly risen?” (5)

The answer to Rollo May’s question is easy: No longer would you and I be afraid. If we knew without a doubt in the world that Jesus is risen from the dead, we would fear nothing. Death? Are you kidding me? Death is entrance to God’s glory. If we are a disciple of Jesus, the day of our dying ought to be the happiest day of our life. Do you believe that? Well, yes. That’s easy to say, isn’t it, but we are not much different from those disciples on Easter Sunday night. We believe it, but there is a part of us that is still uncertain, doubting. Our text contains the story of Doubting Thomas. Well, Thomas has many comrades-in-arms. We don’t acknowledge it, but he does.

How many of us spend literally years of our lives worrying about finances, worrying about our health, worrying about our loved ones, worrying what people think of us, worrying about whether they think of us at all? If we could only trust our lives to God, if we could truly believe that Christ really did arise from the grave, if we could truly believe that our lives are in God’s hands and that God loves us more than we love our own children--then there is no limit to what God might be able to do for us and through us. Jesus appeared to the disciples and he said to them, “Peace be with you!” And then, knowing how much their hearts needed reassurance he repeated himself.   Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you!”

The late pastor Ron Mehl tells of an experience that his friends, Bob and Gayle Potter, had as foster parents.  One of the Potter’s foster children was a six-year-old girl named Sasha.  Sasha had been abused and neglected by her family. She was fearful and unable to trust anyone.  One day, Gayle discovered that little Sasha was hiding food in her room.  And not just small snacks.  She had stuffed food into every nook and cranny, hiding it in the closet, under her mattress, behind the door.  This little girl had grown up with the fear that there would never be enough--enough food, enough love, enough security.  She hoarded every bit of food she could find, just in case she couldn’t trust the adults to take care of her. (6)

How sad, and yet how very much like us. Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread. He taught us not to look ahead to the next day’s cares and concern, they would take care of themselves. Just focus on today and trust God. But some of us can’t do that, can we? Why? Because deep down we are like little Sasha--never enough material resources, never enough love, never enough security. We’re afraid. And friends, the meaning of Christ showing his disciples his hands and his side is that it doesn’t have to be that way. As someone has said, “The presence of fear is a sure sign that we’re trusting in our own strength.” When will we quit hoarding life and start trusting life to our loving heavenly Father?

Christ said a second time, “Peace be with you!” Then he added these important words, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit . . .”

Why did they need the Holy Spirit? Because he would no longer be with them physically. There would be days and weeks and months and years when he would not be able to reassure them by showing them his hands and side. They would need to depend on the Holy Spirit, which is to say Christ’s Spirit at work in the world. He knew this would not be easy for them. There would be days when they would face unbelievable hardship and deprivation. Without the assurance of Christ’s Holy Spirit they would not make it.  And that’s true for us as well. We believe in Christ. Each year, just as we did last week, we have this grand celebration of Christ’s resurrection, and yet still we live such timid, tentative lives. We need continually to pray that Christ’s Spirit will be as real to us as it was to them.

AND IT WAS REAL TO THEM. Look what happened to them. They went from being fearful to being some of the most daring people who have ever walked this earth.  Ridicule could not deter them, or torture or the threat of death. They answered Rollo May’s question--“what would it mean for our world if He had truly risen?”--by the way they lived. Nothing could stop them. That’s why more than one billion people on this planet today bow at the name of Jesus. Their terror turned to trusting, their fear was replaced by faith. They left the panic room to plant the Gospel in every corner of our world.

Now the question is, what could you and I do if we truly believed that Christ is risen from the dead? Could we make a difference in the world? Could we become more loving, more daring, more dramatic in how we carry the cross of Christ?

The words of the song The Rose come to mind:

It’s the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance.

It’s the dream afraid of waking that never takes a chance.

It’s the one who won’t be taken who cannot seem to give.

And the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live. (7)

Is that where you are right now?  Are you “the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live?” Are you hiding in your own spiritual panic room? Listen, Christ can come into any room if you will let him. Christ can give you his peace. He can breathe into you his spirit. Will you let him? Don’t let any more of life pass you by. Christ is alive! There is nothing in heaven or on earth that we ever need to fear again.

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1. Bruce Felton, What Were They Thinking? (Guilford, Connecticut: The Globe Pequot Press, 2003), p. 141.

2. Source unknown

3. Jane Goodsell, Not a Good Word About Anybody, Ballantine.

4. Robert Goddard, The Panic Room

5. Philip Yancey, Where Is God When It Hurts? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

6. Ron Mehl, What God Whispers in the Night (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2000), pp. 68-69.

7. Performed by Bette Midler, composed by Amanda McBroom. From the Twentieth Century-Fox motion picture The Rose. Published by Alfred Publishing.

Good morning. *(response)* I have a question for you and the congregation this morning. **Hold up the white object and point at it.** I am going to ask you first. What color is this? *(white)* What color is this? *(white)* What color is this? *(white)* Louder, what color is this? *(white)* Louder, what color is this? *(white)* Now let me ask the congregation. What color is this? *(white)* What color is this? *(white)* Louder, what color is this? *(white)* Now everybody. What color is this? *(white)* Louder, what color is this? *(white)* What does a cow drink? *(milk)*. What does a cow drink? *(milk)* **Inquire slowly with emphases:** What does a cow drink? *(water)*  **99% of your congregation will say milk. Hopefully by the third cow question they should realize their mistake and answer water.**

We listen to respond not to hear. Has your mom or dad ever said to you, "You're not listening"? That happens to me too. Someone is trying to tell me something or ask me something and I think I already know the answer and I just blurt it out. I didn't take the time to listen to what they are really telling me or asking me. So, I say, "Milk!" when the answer is really what? *(water)*. When we don't listen it can cause all kinds of problems.

**Application:** The disciples didn't listen and it caused all kinds of problems. Jesus told them that he was going to die and that he would come back to life in three days but they couldn't believe it. Jesus told them over and over and over that this would happen but they didn't understand it because they wouldn't slow down long enough to hear. Then Mary Magdalene told them over and over and over that Jesus had come back to life but they didn't believe it so Jesus had to appear before them and show them the wounds on his hands. Then they finally believed. What does a cow drink? *(water)* Is Jesus alive? *(yes)*