

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
25 May 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Sixth Sunday of Easter

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Matters of the Heart”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*
Touchstone words in Easter: *BLESS and CHALLENGE*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Acts 16:6-15; John 14:23-29

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

How is your heart these days?

I really want you to check in.
Take a moment.

We are so busy and life is so full
and there is so much
information coming at us and so
many circumstances and
situations to process that often
we don't know how our heart is
until we stop to feel. Breathe.
Check in.

I don't know about you but
sometimes with all of the
devastating news these days, I
have to remind myself that
while I may always be walking
around with a heavy heart, I still
can enjoy the lighter moments
of connection and joy we
experience. I can miss that joy
and lightness at times when I
anticipate that the days will
always be heavy because of all
that's going on in the world.

Likewise if you are the one who
people always expect to be “up”

and “happy” and “light up a
room” sometimes it can feel like
you don't have space to say “my
heart is heavy.” You might feel
like you are always the one who
needs to bring inspiration.

So how is your heart? Are you
encouraged, or discouraged?
Weary or hopeful? Anxious and
worried or receptive and open?
What fears do you hold? What
joys?

Our faith is not just about the
beliefs we formulate in our
heads, what we think and
believe. Our faith also informs
our heart, or feeds our heart,
which ultimately impacts our
actions...how we live out our
faith with love in the world.

Last week we looked at how the
minds of the early Apostles
were stretched through the gift
of repentance, or *metanoia* in
the Greek, which is defined as
meta (beyond) the *noia* (mind).
We saw how their minds were

changed, their perspectives shifted, their outlooks re-oriented. Today we will see how the early Apostles hearts were stretched, and deepened, and opened. But first, they were fearful and discouraged.

Our Gospel text invites us to examine how the peace of Christ speaks into our fear, giving us enough regulation and calm and centering so that we do not completely block ourselves out from the world or stay huddled in a lock room in fear.

Then Acts 16 shows us how when we take the courage we get from Christ's peace and start living in the world, we will sometimes get discouraged and lose heart. And often the best way for us to be encouraged and take heart is when another person open's their heart, or shares their home, with us.

And then as one heart is opened, so is another, and another...and gradually we create more peace and hospitality and love in the world...and more of that we create, the more fear is released.

I think of this like a spiraling effect that begins within our own heart, and our own ways of centering and putting the

message of Christ into our hearts, and then radiates out to a larger community and then eventually to the world. But it starts within.

Let's start with fear. And the very real affects it has on our lives.

If you don't have them silenced, then the "Breaking News" alert notifications on your phone will no doubt break you—as they ping you all day with fear-inducing, heart wrenching news: Gazan children starving to death from malnutrition, Ukrainians dying in Kiev from Russian air attacks, a young couple in D.C. gunned down by antisemitic gun violence, Venezuelans unlawfully being deported to South Sudan (who is itself on the brink of civil war), international students and professors unlawfully being barred from enrolling in Harvard, and judges and courts responding to and ruling on all these things and more.

Or maybe the fear or anxiety is within your own life. Maybe your health is declining, or family dynamics are uncertain, or your finances are precarious, or you are struggling with depression. Fear is so close to so many of us, and within us.

We have normalized living in a constant state of fear. Which is not healthy. And it's ironic because actually, fear is a normal and healthy physical reaction in our bodies. What's not normal is living in fear 24/7.

An article called the *Chill of Fear* from Harvard Medicine says, *"Fear is a basic emotion and a necessary contributor to human survival; it is one of seven "universal emotions," something experienced by nearly everyone around the world. And it is part of our biology:*

It's the work of your amygdala, a tiny almond-shaped structure in your brain. Sensory signals alert it; in turn, it triggers a cascade of activity, deluging your body with messages that widen your eyes, prick your ears, accelerate your heart, quicken your breathing, wrench your stomach, moisten your palms, and launch a full-body, organ-clenching, corpuscle-filling chill...

"You could call the amygdala a relevance detector," says Nouchine Hadjikhani, an HMS associate professor of radiology

*who specializes in capturing the activity of the brain as it reacts to fear-provoking stimuli. "In less than 100 milliseconds, just one-tenth of a second, sensory information reaches the amygdala, which signals your brain to be aware. All your systems become more receptive. You're now ready to fight, freeze, or flee."*¹

I see this response happen in nature with Fran the baby bunny who lives under our shed. She is just fine, enjoying the grass, until she sees Deacon, our golden retriever come bounding through the doggy door into the backyard. At that point, depending on how far she is from the safety of the shed, she either freezes or flees. And this is normal and natural and exactly what you want in a temporary state of danger.

But living in a constant state of danger or fear has devastating effects on our health:

"Fear weakens our immune system and can cause cardiovascular damage, gastrointestinal problems such as ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome, and decreased fertility. It can lead to

¹ Ann Marie Menting, "The Chill of Fear: Dread requires only a tenth of a second take root," *Harvard Medicine*

(Summer 2011), accessed on May 25, 2025 at <https://magazine.hms.harvard.edu/articles/chill-fear>.

accelerated ageing and even premature death.

Fear can impair formation of long-term memories and cause damage to certain parts of the brain, such as the hippocampus. This can make it even more difficult to regulate fear and can leave a person anxious most of the time. To someone in chronic fear, the world looks scary and their memories confirm that.

Fear can interrupt processes in our brains that allow us to regulate emotions, read non-verbal cues and other information presented to us, reflect before acting, and act ethically. This impacts our thinking and decision-making in negative ways, leaving us susceptible to intense emotions and impulsive reactions. All of these effects can leave us unable to act appropriately.

Other consequences of long-term fear include fatigue, clinical depression, and PTSD.

So whether threats to our security are real or perceived, they impact our mental and physical wellbeing.”² The *fear itself* does the damage, not the

event causing the fear, real or perceived. So for many reasons, it’s so very important for us to regulate our systems, lower or fear, and do our best not to spiral in anxiety.

So, how do we do this? What do we do, how do we cope?

Well, we can start by reading the words from John’s Gospel today. *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid,”* (John 14:27).

The power of words cannot be overstated. We should repeat these words to ourselves over and over again. Pair them with your breath. Allow them to sink in. You are feeding your heart a healthier food, a different message, than every other message flooding your inbox or pinging your devices. To read these words is to remind ourselves that the way the world is NOT how God wants the world to be; there is a different vision; a different hope; a different gift that Christ gives us.

² Louise Delagran & Sue Towey, “Impact of Fear and Anxiety,” *University of Minnesota* (2025), accessed on May 25, 2025 at

<https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/impact-fear-and-anxiety>.

And remember, these beloved words are shared by Jesus to his disciples as parting words of comfort and challenge. He is preparing them for his death, as much as one can do that, and also using this time to say his own very personal goodbye to these friends who have been with him for three years straight. He reminds them to love others, and that in experiencing and sharing that love, the Father, that is our Creator God, will make a home in our heart with us. Meaning, when we love God and love others, then God's love takes up residence in our hearts. Imagine the love of God showing up on your doorstep, with a moving van full of all the loveliest and most comforting things in the world—and saying—*“I’m here, ready to move in. Show me to my room...and yes, I’m staying a long, long while.”*

This is not pollyannish comfort, this is real heart-medicine. We take Advil to sooth our headaches. Well we take Christ's peace and comforting words to soothe our hearts. Again, these words are a reminder that the kin-dom of God is one of peace and the version of the world tha Christ calls us to is one of Love, not fear. We are not misguided for

craving peace, that is what Christ wants for us too...what Christ is trying to give us.

And it's helpful to remember that the first followers of Jesus in the gospels and the first apostles in Acts all lived in a time of very real fear. A time of Empire and control, where many were living as a colonized people without rights. They were oppressed and persecuted. They, too, were afraid, and rightly so. Jesus himself was crucified by the State government after all. And many of the disciples would go on to be killed for their faith—so the fear was *real*.

Yet in this very real reality of fear—*our faith* was born. Our origin story as followers of Jesus and as the Christian church is that of FAITH being born in a time of FEAR. Even the pronouncement of the angels before Jesus' birth was *“Fear not.”* Even after the joy of Easter and the resurrection, on that first Easter evening, when the resurrected Christ appeared to the disciples, they were...afraid!! Huddled in fear, locked in a room, afraid for their lives, and Jesus said what? *“Peace be with you...”* and he breathed his Spirit on them.

This thought has been a gift to me this week. To realize and reflect upon, the number of times that Jesus or some divine figure speaks peace into hearts of fear. Fear is soil in which the gospel seed is sowed. It's everywhere. So, if we are afraid, for whatever reason in whatever season, we are in good company. We are not alone. The origins of our faith story are born in the context of fear, with plotlines of fear. Fear is not to be eradicated. It is to be soothed with the balm of peace, the breath of Christ. The reminder of God's comforting presence with us, which then calms our hearts and minds (amygdala) enough to connect with others, to be reminded that our true calling is love. To be a people of love. And when we live from that place of love, we not only will live in less fear, we quell fear in others.

As Henri Nouwen writes the opposite of love is not hate, it's fear. Fear is the opposite of love. So if we can quell fear, we can begin to build up love.³

And the first step to quelling fear is receiving the peace of Jesus. Centering. Feeding

ourselves spirituality in quiet, in solitude, in prayer.

When we are afraid, as the disciples were in a heightened state of government power and Roman imperial violence, Jesus breathes peace into them and reminds them that he does not give as the world gives: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."*

Interestingly, the Greek word translated in our passage as "troubled" is *tarassō* which actually means "restless, anxious, distressed, afraid"⁴ and the Greek word translated in our passage as "afraid" is *deiliaō* which means "timid."⁵ So Jesus is really saying *do not let your hearts be afraid, because if you are afraid or fearful, you will then be timid*. You'll withdraw. You'll close off your heart, not open it. You'll stop using your gifts instead of growing them. What is required in times of fear is *courage* (or strength of heart, *cour* in the latin means 'heart'), not timidity, or (withdrawing of heart or courage).

So the lesson from our first text today, our gospel reading, is simply to remind you that our

³ Henri Nouwen, "Moving from the House of Fear into the House of Love," *The Awakening Project*, accessed on May 25, 2025 at <https://awakeningproject.ca/moving-from-the-house-of-fear-into-the-house-of-love/>.

⁴ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5015/kjv/tr/0-1/>

⁵ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1168/kjv/tr/0-1/>

faith, from it's beginning, was born into and came out of a time of fear. May we allow Christ's love and presence to loosen that fear just enough to live our lives, and leave the locked rooms, and begin to follow the Spirit's leading.

And this leads us to our text in Acts 16; the Apostles begin to quell their fear and follow the Spirit, but it is, at first a disappointing journey. They are losing heart.

In Acts 16, Paul, Silas, and Timothy, are setting out to continue their calling to spread the news about Christ's resurrection to more places and people. And in the first few verses of our text we learn that there are places they wanted to go that the Holy Spirit didn't allow them to go. Places they attempted to enter that were blocked. So they had to reroute to new places, perhaps even places they never wanted to go in the first place.

Like when you driving around Denver, dutifully following your GPS directions and then are forced to take a different turn due to construction or a roadblock or traffic jam, and the nice GPS voice in the accent of

your choice says "*Rerouting, Rerouting, Rerouting.*"

Perhaps it has felt like sometimes in your life, the Holy Spirit is less a proactive guiding light for you, but more of a voice saying "*Rerouting, rerouting.*" Meaning, you keep trying to do the right things and go the places you think you should go, and somehow where you want to go, or where you thought you were headed is not where you end up...maybe not even where God is trying to lead you to be.

Well, after being on the road far from home, Paul and Silas—who have parted ways with Barnabas and John Mark but have picked up young Timothy—well, they want to go through what was called Asia at the time—the pink area on your map in your Order of Worship.



We're not sure why they wanted to go that way. What we do know is that they didn't get to go to the place they wanted in

the way that they wanted. The Holy Spirit forbade them to “speak the word in Asia,” as our text says. Why? Who knows.

Many times in life we don’t get to know why something is, we just know that it is the way it is. And the longer we dwell on the ‘why’ the longer we get stuck. Some ‘whys’ we just don’t get to know, and maybe we’re not supposed to know the ‘why,’ or maybe there really isn’t a good answer as to ‘why.’ Or maybe the why will come years later, with the wisdom of hindsight.

In any case, instead of going through Asia, they make their way on the edges of Asia through Phrygia and Galatia and then along the northern edge of Asia to Mysia, where they attempted to go to Bithynia along the southern coast of the Black Sea, but again the Spirit didn’t allow them to go that way so they skirted the region of Mysia and made it to the seaport city of Troas, on the Eastern side of the Aegean Sea.

Imagine, as you will, Paul being physically tired and exhausted from travel and spiritually and emotionally exhausted from trying to go places he thought was called to go or that he thought would be a good idea,

and being told “No.” Not just once but a couple of times.

How many ‘Nos’ does it take for you to get discouraged? How many “*construction detours*” on your commute before you start cursing? How many “*I’m sorry I can’t help you, let me transfer you*”’s from a customer service rep before you just want to hang up the phone in frustration? How many “*Thank you for applying but we went with someone else*”’s before you begin spiraling on how you’ll never find a job again? How many “*It’s not you, it’s me*” break-ups before you start to really believe, “*maybe it IS me? It MUST be me.*”

Some days we are more patient than others. Some days we have more wherewithal to endure rejection. Some days we are okay with rerouting. But other days, we’re not. Other days, we just simply get discouraged or frustrated or simply heart-heavy thinking that it feels like nothing is going our way or we’re not going the right way or we don’t even know if we want to try any way again.

I imagine this could be what Paul is thinking right about now. He is losing heart. And it's in this moment that Paul has a

vision. And this vision happens at night, which we might call a dream. And you know how dreams are, they can be metaphorical and symbolic in different ways.

And as Paul has this vision, he sees the entire country of Macedonia representing in one person, a man, who is *pleading with him* to come over to Macedonia and *help* his people. When I read this, I couldn't help but think of all the people who turn to me to ask for help, for money, for prayer, for justice, for hope. It's sobering to hear someone pleading.

When I read this, I couldn't help but think of the Palestinians who were sharing in a zoom meeting I had last week for the Faith Leaders Advisory Council for Bright Stars of Bethlehem, a non-profit that supports the arts and education of Palestinian students at Dar al Kalima University. As these Palestinian pastors, professors, and students shared about how every day they get word of different family members and faculty members and students who are being killed or dying of starvation, one said, *"We feel abandoned by the world. We are starving for food, yes. And starving for our humanity, our*

rights, our lives and livelihoods. Everything has been wiped away. Why is helping us so hard? Why is feeding our children controversial?" Whew.

This is what is in my mind when I think of the man in Paul's vision saying, "Help us." Paul is fired up. He has renewed purpose. He wants to help them in any way he can. Even though he doesn't quite know why they need help yet. The vision was compelling enough for Paul to go; he had renewed direction and purpose.

You can trace the path these three took on their multi-day journey on your map. They were hop, skip jumping across these small islands until landing at Neapolis on the shores of Macedonia, then headed northwest to Philippi, which we are told very clearly is a Roman colony. THIS is why the Macedonians need help. They are colonized, ruled by a brutal power that uses violence to subjugate them. After all, in just a few short verses Paul and Silas will be thrown in prison by these Roman rulers. Again, we might imagine modern day occupied territories...Gaza, Ukraine. Places where see powerful forces wielding violence to assert control and

authority, destroying and dehumanizing innocent lives in the process.

It's notable that there is not an established Jewish synagogue in this city—that shows the depth of Roman control. Before, in all of the apostles' journeys, the first place they go is to the synagogue in whatever new city they are in. But here, as there is no synagogue, the safest place seems to be on the outskirts of the Philippi, this city that was a strategic Roman satellite site...at the juncture of the "Eastern" and "Western" worlds you might say.

And who is gathering here on the outskirts of the city by the river for a time of prayer? Women. Women are gathering outside the city gates, by the river. These women go "down to the river to pray" and Paul, Silas, and Timothy find them there and begin speaking to them about the good news of the gospel. Among them is a woman named Lydia.

We are told quite a bit about Lydia. She was a worshiper of God, meaning, she already worshipped the same God that the Jewish people worshipped, even though she herself was not Jewish. She was a spiritual

foreigner to the faith tradition of which she had grown to be a part of with other Jewish women (even though she herself was not a Jew), and then we find out she is ethnically a foreigner in the land/region as well. She is not from Philippi, she is not Macedonian or Roman. She is a Gentile from Thyatira. Thyatira! Follow your map back over the Aegean Sea to the central part of Asia. Lydia was from the very region that Paul and Silas and Timothy had been forbidden to go to by the Spirit!! Isn't that curious?

The Spirit said, "*No, don't go to THAT place,*" and then when they get to the place the Spirit directed them to go, the person who actually listens to them and opens her heart to receive their message is from the place they were forbidden to go in the first place!

Funny how life is sometimes. Sometimes there is a greater plan at work than what we can see at first glance. It turns out Paul, Silas, and Timothy wanted to spread the gospel to the people in Asia, and they ended up getting to do just that...just not in the places they expected or in the way they expected.

What they thought was a closed door, really wasn't a closed door. They were just led to that room by a whole other hallway, and entered from a different doorway, a different angle, a different way.

Even more, Lydia is most likely, then, a freedwoman, having previously been enslaved by the Romans. That's how she probably ended up in Philippi. Which makes her story all the more remarkable. She is a dealer in purple cloth, purple being an imperial color, so people buying this cloth would be people of means. All that to say, Lydia was a businesswoman who did okay for herself. There is no mention of a man connected to her, which means she is either single or widowed and she herself then is the head of a household. Which is significant, because she has the authority to open up her household, or her home, to provide lodging for Paul, Silas, and Timothy—not just now but again after they get out of prison too.

“Come and stay at my home,” she says. Did you catch this?

The Lord opens Lydia's heart, and Lydia opens her home. That's what happens with matters of the heart, right?

When our hearts are touched or changed or opened, then our boundaries and rules are softened. Communities are formed. People we would not have been open to previously, we are open to now.

Paul was losing heart in his missionary endeavors. And as the Lord opened Lydia's heart to receive his message, it's as if at the same time the Lord was encouraging Paul saying, *“Don't Lose Heart, Take Heart!”* Not only is there a new household of believers, but now you have a home, a homebase for your missionary work here. Lydia's heart was opened, which led her to opening her home, so that Paul could stay there, which led to more hearts being opened as they spread the gospel in that message.

Open hearts lead to open homes and spirits which lead to more open hearts. There is a direct correlation to the opening of our hearts and the opening of our homes and our borders and our churches...open hearts lead to loving actions and collectively our loving actions quell fear.

The hospitality of Lydia changed the trajectory of Paul's whole ministry. Her open heart and open door led to him

opening more and more hearts, including our own, through his ministry and church planting and even his letters!

Take heart, indeed!

In this Roman-occupied city of Philippi, things were really, really rough. Life was hard. And yet the Philippian community—rooted in Lydia’s hospitality—cared so well for Paul. Do you remember how Paul begins his letter to the Philippians? I mean, it is a letter from the heart if there ever is one from Paul:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it... (Phil. 1:3-6).

He goes on in that letter to talk about how harshly he was treated by the Roman government, and yet describes how that contrasts with their hospitality and support in meaningful ways. Their actions speak of the love of Christ. Even the love of Christ that comes through suffering. You might remember that at the end

of the letter to the church at Philippi, Paul writes:

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. **Do not be anxious about anything**, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. **And the God of peace will be with you.**” (Phil. 4:4-9).*

The Apostle Paul says the same thing Jesus says to his disciples in John: when you practice love, when you keep my word which is a word of love, when you love others as I have loved you, my peace is with you...my Shalom...my healing, my wholeness, my wellness of being is with you. This kind of

peace is not just an absence of conflict or violence, but rather, a presence of Spirit that creates inner calm, well-being, integration.

Opening our hearts to others is what allows us to practice love in tangible ways, just like Lydia's tangible hospitality. And when we practice love, that keeps our hearts open, and keeps us from closing off our heart, which then circles us back to where we began...quelling fear with Christ's peace.

May we remember these three matters of the heart from these texts:

- 1) The roots of our faith story and faith community as Christians come about in the context of Fear. Faith is born into the Landscape of Fear, not apart from it. It is through the love and peace of Christ that we can quell our fear enough to venture out of our locked rooms and locked heart to start following the Spirit.
- 2) Knowing that fear is real and there are real powers at work in the world making us fearful for good reason, and and knowing we will get discouraged and lose heart, and knowing there are times

we will be fearful and afraid, may we remember that when Paul was losing heart, the Lord used Lydia, opening her heart And through her open heart, then her open home, Paul was able to take heart, and to be encouraged, and to open ever more hearts across that region and the world.

Which leads to the third point that connects these two:

- 3) Faith might be born in the context of Fear; but it grows and thrives and spreads in the context of community. And in community, we practice love, and when we practice love, it's impossible to close off our heart and the more open our heart, the less we allow fear to dominate our lives

So friends, tend to your heart this week. *Christ does not give to us as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.*

Take heart. And when you are losing heart, look for the ones around you whose hearts are open. And if your heart is open or opening, look for those around you who are losing heart and welcome them into your

lives. We need one another.
Because God will make a home
in our hearts when we make a
home in the hearts of one
another.

So, take heart. What keeps us
from losing heart is the
encouragement we receive from
the open heart of someone else.
It only takes one and we never
know where we'll find that open
heart, or how God might be
opening our heart to give peace
to another heart.

Amen.