

In 2009, Zaneta Reid left her abusive boyfriend so that she could start a better life for herself and her four sons. A short time after the break-up, Zaneta's ex-boyfriend came to her house and tried to strangle her. He was arrested and she testified against him in court. He was sentenced to nine years in prison. After she testified, the ex-boyfriend's family picked up right where he left off, making death threats, coming by her house, throwing things at her. She packed some of her things and just left the house.

Shortly after that, one of her children got sick and she took him to Children's Hospital. After the physicians took care of the boy, she and her family spent the rest of the night in the waiting room. Zaneta told the nurses who kept checking on her that she was waiting for a ride, but she actually had no place to go. She was waiting for the sun to come up so she could take her older son to school.

Zaneta called shelters, but none of them had space so each night she and her children would have to find a friend's house to stay in. For two weeks she went from friend to friend until a space opened for her and her boys at Mary's Place, a shelter that began as a ministry of the Church of Mary Magdalene. Four months later, she and her family found permanent housing.

In telling her story to StoryCorps¹, the massive oral history project, Zaneta said: "One of the hardest things I ever did was to leave my home knowing I'm not going to go back here. So I wanted to give back, to help moms and ladies that are going through the same thing that I had just gone through. I tell them a little bit about my story and how it's hard to keep that hope, but it's not forever." She now works at Mary's Place helping homeless women and their children to find housing and to reclaim their lives.

Zaneta's story is a story of overcoming fear. Overcoming fear is what we talk about here at church, what we proclaim to a world swimming in fear. Our scripture, the church, our faith—these are all assertions that God has subdued fear in the lives

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of human beings, even as fear and its kin, hatred, continue to lurk in human hearts. Events like the murder of nine people at prayer in a Charleston church can feed fear at the same time it stimulates outrage. Outrage is warranted, but only if that outrage finally prods us into action. If we choose to let fear take center stage, then fear will hollow us out, exhausting our resistance, weaken our resolve and sap our strength. Fear can draw down our emotional reserves until eventually we forget that Jesus is in the boat with us. Fear in various forms comes to all of us from time to time. It's what we choose to do in response to fear that makes all the difference.

Fear came to the disciples that day in the boat. But I don't think they were afraid of the storm. Not really. I think they were afraid of something else. And their response to that fear is where this story really gets interesting.

Remember that several of the disciples were fishermen with a lifetime of experience on the Sea of Galilee. They knew how to handle themselves and a ship on stormy waters. Jesus urged the disciples to go across the sea, but this meant more than a change of scenery. The other side of the sea was Gentile territory. That's what made the trip more potentially dangerous in the minds of the Jewish disciples. Up to this point, Jesus had been talking and teaching, most recently about the kingdom of God being like a mustard plant that penetrates and thrives, growing wild whether we want it where it grows or not.

So the disciples may have been wary when the storm came up, maybe even a little anxious, but the sailors among them would have trusted their experience. I can even imagine them waking Jesus up just because they needed all hands on deck. No, the more intriguing moment of fear came after Jesus woke up and said to the great storm: "Peace! Be still!"

And here is where the original Greek opens some fascinating possibilities. First, instead of nature responding to Jesus with a "dead calm" in the New Revised Standard Version, the Greek version renders it as a "great calm." Second, the question that Jesus might actually be asking in the Greek version is "Why do you dread?" or "Are any of you dreading?" implying the kind of fear, *deilos*, associated with losing something. In describing the disciples' response, which the NRSV translates as "awe," the Greek uses a different word, *phobos*, for their fear and pairs

it with the same word used to describe both the wind and the calm. Put simply, Jesus' transformation of the great storm into a great calm produced great fear. Great fear in the hearts of the same privileged insiders to whom Jesus explained his parables. But as I said last week, he did not explain with words in rational, linear clarity. Jesus was *himself* the ultimate parable. His life, death and resurrection *are* his explanation. This story from Mark was the first time the disciples had seen Jesus reveal his true identity and power, so I think their response is understandable. Even as insiders, they were still outside the mystery, at least for the moment.

You and I, on the other hand, get to hear the story of Jesus calming the great storm in the context of the Risen Christ. The disciples, those refreshingly human and faltering people, chose to continue on with Christ across the sea, bringing their fears with them into this strange new reality, learning to trust as they went.

Let me emphasize that Jesus did *not* say, "There is *nothing* to fear." That's substantially different than asking "Why are you afraid?" Because there are things in life to fear, are there not? Isolation, rejection, money problems, disease? A racist with a gun? There really are fearsome people and circumstances in our world.

But then there are different kinds of fear as well. Fear that paralyzes is not the same as the reverent awe that arises in moments when we recognize just who this Jesus really is: The Risen One who calms our fears not by pretending that they are not there, but by being with us. Always.

To forget that Jesus is in the boat leaves us to face fearful circumstances and people all by ourselves. Living in that kind of fear will eat away at the ties that bind us to God and to each other. So when we start getting swamped, what's left of those ties may not be sufficient to hold and we can easily sink into ourselves, into hopelessness or desperation. In those moment, hell rejoices.

Staying with Christ, even when flashes of God's radiance make us quiver, doesn't prevent fearful circumstances from arising. Trusting in the Risen Christ is how we navigate through the most difficult of times without being paralyzed because the God who raised Jesus from the dead is there with us. In time, as we move Christ toward new shores, perhaps even with increased trembling, God begins to use *our* lives and voices as vessels for peace, even for great calm.

The church is where we remind each other that God will never abandon us to suffering and death—that God *never* desires pain and suffering for us. God did not cause the isolation and terror that Zaneta Reid and her family experienced, but God was beside her as she searched for healing and purpose. There is no trace of God’s will in the heartbreak and chaos that Dylann Roof inflicted upon Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. What we do next with God’s guidance remains to be seen. Will it be new shores or old fears?

In those situations and here in our own parish life—in *our* lives, yours and mine—the Risen Christ is present creating the atmosphere in which possibilities can emerge. Standing with us in the midst of all our storms, the Risen Christ speaks with terrifying authority. And what he says is: “Peace!”

Jesus had enough faith in his disciples to sleep while they tended the ship on their way to a new shore. When their crisis came, they called upon Jesus and he responded in a way that fruitfully challenged their faith. In just the same way, God has faith in us to tend to what lay before us. In the midst of our difficulties, even when our storms appear to be at their greatest, we can choose to sit down with great fears, or we can hear and obey God’s command for great peace. And we can *act*—with trembling knees and quavering voices perhaps—but we *can* act as though we trust that God’s promised peace will come.

New shores or old fears?

Here’s the choice Ethel Lance’s daughter made². Speaking to Dylann Roof, the man who murdered her mother last week inside Emmanuel Church, she said: “I will never hold her again,” she said, “but I forgive you.” Felicia Sanders, the mother of the murdered Tywanza Sanders, said this: “Every fiber in my body hurts, and I will never be the same. May God have mercy on you.”

If these people can choose to have faith in God’s peace in the face of such withering horror, how can we not join them? How can we not join them with Christ and travel on toward a new shore?

² As reported by CNN. See: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/20/us/charleston-church-shooting-main/index.html>