

April 19, 2020 Have No Fear Homily: Woody Allen is a noted filmmaker, comedian and writer of exceptional talent. By his own admission, he is not a man of religious faith. Indeed, in his writings and films he often pokes fun at religious believers, although in a good-natured way. Still, he is deeply anguished about his own mortality. Death haunts him. In an interview eight years ago, Allen, now in his eighties, was asked a question about death by a journalist. "How is your relationship with death?" "My relationship with death remains the same" replied Allen. "I am strongly against it". In one of his plays he ponders the question, "Am I afraid of death?" and replies "I am not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens!"

In today's gospel reading (Jn. 20: 19-31), death looms large. The scene takes place on the evening of the first day, which is Sunday night. The badly frightened Apostles are in a state of high anxiety. The doors are locked. All are immobilized and locked by fear. Those responsible for the condemnation and crucifixion of Christ, the religious authorities, are searching for them. They fear for their safety, anticipating arrest, torture, imprisonment and, in all likelihood, a violent death.

But then, unexpectedly, Christ appears. "Jesus came and stood in their midst". (Jn. 20:19) There was no need to unlock the door to admit him.

Recall that during his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus told them, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid." (Jn. 14:27) No fewer than three times does Jesus say "Peace be with you" in the upper room where the disciples gathered in craven fear on the evening of that first Easter Sunday. (Jn. 20: 19, 21, 26) According to the biblical scholar George Martin, the Hebrew word for peace means well-being, security and satisfaction. It is an inner peace that flows from his divine presence. Jesus fulfilled a promise he made to his friends a short time ago: "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice and no one can take your joy from you". (Jn. 16:22)

The risen Jesus overcomes our fears and transforms our life. With his peace the Apostles can carry out the work he has assigned to them without being distracted by concerns for their own safety. They can face persecution sustained by the peace given them by Jesus.

As our nation continues its titanic struggle with the Corona Virus pandemic our situation, at this moment in time, is remarkably comparable to that of the disciples who were fearfully gathered behind closed doors on that first day of the week, Sunday. We are in a similar predicament today. Our doors are locked from the inside. We are on lockdown. But just as then, Jesus says to each one individually and to all of us... Peace be with you! When we are aware of the presence of Our Lord who has triumphed over death, we sense that we are serene and at peace. The Lord himself is Peace!

Recently, I received a phone call from a woman who was frantic with worry. The prospect of contracting the virus and dying of the disease filled her with dread. She was immobilized, and unable to carry on with her life. I pointed out to her that we are never alone in our journey of faith. Even if we lock the doors of our hearts, Jesus stands ready to enter and embolden us to witness to his Resurrection.

In one of his highly praised films, "Love and Death", Woody Allen plays the part of a hapless Russian named Boris. In one memorable scene, Boris prepares for his own execution. As he approaches the hour

of death, he ponders his fate: death. "Every man has to go sometime but I am different. I have to go at 6 A.M. ... it was 5 A.M., but I have a good lawyer!" One can only pray that this talented artist may be blessed with the gift of faith someday. He may not have the answers, but he certainly has asked some good questions.

What does Easter mean? It is to live in the light of the Resurrection. That marvelous light makes the darkness of unbelief and despair vanish in an instant and transforms the unbeliever into a disciple of Our Risen Lord, who lives and reigns forever.

Amen!