

“Fear & Faith” by Rev. Rachel Rivers
Edited transcript of a sermon delivered on February 2, 2003
Scripture Readings: Psalm 16 & Mark 1:14-15

I had an extraordinary experience of fear and faith three weeks ago on my scuba dive trip to Cozumel. Ever since it happened I've wanted to tell you about it because it taught me a lot about the importance of moving through fear and how faith can support us through this fear, and of the wonderful riches on the other side.

Before I tell you just what happened to me, I want to give you a little bit of theological background so that you will be thinking in a similar framework to how I was thinking at 3 AM on the beginning of my scuba trip.

We are citizens of two worlds, the external physical world that we're all aware of now, and the internal, spiritual world—the world of thought and feeling. There are different laws operating in these two different worlds that will be obvious to you once I point them out. One of the most basic laws in the spiritual world that's upside down from the physical has to do with giving and receiving. When we give something away physically, we have less of it than we had before. For example, if you have a thousand dollars and you give it away you have about a thousand dollars less than you had before. In the spiritual world, if you give a thousand dollars away as a gift, and it is a gift that has meaning and value to you, then you are spiritually richer than you were before.

Another example of the difference between the physical and the spiritual worlds has to do with the sun. The physical sun that our planet orbits gives us heat and light. There is also a spiritual sun. The spiritual sun gives us heat and light also, but the heat of the spiritual sun is love, and the light of the spiritual sun is wisdom, or understanding. We can recognize this in the expressions we use, such as our saying “oh, I see” when we understand something. We are seeing with our spiritual eyes; that is, understanding. Our spiritual lives are as dependent on the love and wisdom flowing into us from God as our physical lives are dependent on the warmth and light coming to us from the physical sun.

We can become aware of the spiritual world through our physical world experiences. When the sun sets, or appears to set, the beauty of that experience can touch our souls. The warmth of someone's hand, the look of an eye—these are physical experiences that can touch our spiritual soul.

In our scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is drawing near. Repent and believe the good news.” *The Kingdom of God drawing near* has to do with us drawing near the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is our spiritual world. Our drawing near the Kingdom of God is our standing in the spiritual sunlight of God's love and wisdom.

Repenting is realizing what we're doing that keeps us in the dark. It has to do with our seeing some of the ways that we are acting that keep us feeling more separate, more cut off, more alone, more afraid, than we might otherwise feel. Repenting is becoming aware of our less-than-healthy thoughts and behavior, and having the courage to change our ways. Jesus says, "Repent and believe the good news." The *Good News* is that we are loved. Each and every one of us is loved. And each and every one of us is saved in that love. This is the spiritual reality. We are all loved, and we are all saved in that love.

We don't always feel safe, but when we are afraid if we can allow ourselves to stand in the sunlight of God's love it can help us face our fears and experience more truly how good life is. A lot of us aren't feeling very safe in our lives these days and we're part of a world community that's not feeling very safe. That's a physical reality. We are each drawn to do what we can to help in our struggling world. If we draw on the spiritual love and wisdom that is God we will make wiser decisions and act for the greater good.

Okay, now for my story. I was trained as a scuba diver in Monterey last April, but I'd never actually been scuba diving. Scuba diving was something that I thought I would really love, but the training was so difficult that after it was over I wasn't so sure whether scuba diving was for me or not. So I pushed myself on my vacation in January to really give it a chance. And so three weeks ago I found myself in Cozumel at three in the morning waking up terrified, because I was scheduled to go out on a boat scuba diving in just a few hours. The fear did not lessen as the morning hours ticked away. I got up, did not eat much breakfast, and went out onto the dock to the boat.

Still feeling very frightened, I boarded the boat and we headed out to the corral reef. The seas were quite rough and my fear grew as the waves grew. I was with seven other people who had all been scuba diving before and I didn't know any of them. There was also the dive master. His name was Jose. As we approached the reef Jose started telling us about the dive plan. First we were going to tip over backwards off the boat, he said, and then descend to 60 feet, swim through a tunnel of rock, descend down to 90 feet and swim along the edge of a 2000 foot deep canyon. It was at this point that my fear tumbled over into tears. Jose had already noticed that I was afraid, but my tears left him in know doubt as to how afraid I really was. He came over to me and stooped down and looked me right in the eye. "This is easy", he said, "because I'm going to stay right with you." Still feeling very frightened and wanting to make sure he knew what staying right with me really meant, I took his hand and I said, "If you don't let go of me, I'll be all right."

Still more scared than you can imagine, I tipped over backwards out of the boat. Jose took hold of my hand and kept eye contact with me as we slowly descended. And he did not let go. We swam through the rock tunnel and down to 90 feet and then I experienced the most beautiful hour of my life. Drifting along

with the current in such a wonderous underwater world, with Jose holding my hand, I found that I was no longer afraid. I was amazed that underneath the surface of the rough seas there was such extraordinary richness of life and beauty, and that I could feel such joy and peace. Gently drifting over the coral gardens, with fish swimming all around us, all fear left me. I saw sea turtles and eels and fish of every size and shape, and even a shark. I was in awe.

When the air in our tanks was getting low it was time to return to the surface. It was not until I saw the boat above us that I remembered how rough the seas were. In the high waves and no longer having the experience of being weightless, I struggled back onto the rocking boat. When we were all on board and on our way, the spiritual significance of what I had just experienced hit me. And once again tears began to stream down my face. This time they were not tears of fear, but tears of realization.

I realized that what had happened to me during the hour of my dive is actually always taking place, spiritually speaking. Jose was in the role of God. God is always holding our hand. We are always drifting through the most extraordinarily beautiful reality, beauty beyond what any of us could possibly conceive. And this is happening at the same time that on the surface the seas can be rough and overwhelming.

I don't know if I'm over my fear of scuba diving. Right now it feels like it, but once I'm back in that situation, I don't know. But I do know that I have a deeper experience of faith that I can carry with me everywhere now.

Believing the Good News of God's love is not a matter of thought. It's a matter of letting in an experience that is happening all the time. I don't know what image can work for you of God holding your hand, but I invite you to find one. God wants each of us to experience the truth of how God's love is with us, how love never leaves our side. God urges us to repent and believe the Good News. Amen.