

While it has its place, fear, as we all know, can sometimes be overwhelming. From dealing with Covid and trying to return to normal, to fear of the unknown, to fear of the past, or fear of failure or letting others down, sometimes fear can take over a soul, and we can find ourselves a bit like the apostles at the start of our Gospel, under a voluntary lockdown wanting to hide from the world, perhaps from what they've done, and not knowing what to do. But, what if we were to instead, with the help of our Lord, confront fear? What if we were to take seriously the first word He says to His friends, "peace," knowing that we were loved, and forgiven? Might we just find the peace we were looking for?

For years, Joanna Corfield, who today helps people through a special kind of therapy she does with horses in England, was trapped in her own upper room of sorts, struggling with fear and self-loathing.

She found herself second guessing a decision she made to get horses. She paced in the family home near Norfolk, England, waiting for the horse whisperer to pull into the drive. She'd found his information in an equine magazine. He claimed to help people with difficult horses. She was desperate. Her two horses ran from her or lashed out. What if she couldn't make them feel settled? What if she failed with them as she had with so much in my life, she wondered.

Her son, Richard, then 11 years old, had convinced her to adopt a small pony, Gus, several months earlier. Richard had a Saturday job tending horses for a neighbor. "Please, Mum, please! I'll take such good care of him," he pleaded.

The family had the land, and Gus had been abandoned. He needed a home. Joanna's friends, after they got over the initial shock, insisted that she adopt a second horse. "Horses only feel safe in a herd," one said. So they got Bronwen, a dark bay mare, to keep Gus company.

What did you think would happen? She asked herself as she looked out the window for the horse whisperer. Perfect harmony? She wanted so badly for everyone to all get along. She'd always loved animals. But Gus, fiery little thing, kicked and bit. And Bronwen, who had been so loving and well-behaved in her old home, bolted for the farthest corner of her paddock whenever Joanna approached. What could she possibly be afraid of? Joanna thought to herself that she was so small and meek, so it couldn't be here. The only person who'd ever been afraid of Joanna was Joanna.

Fear had controlled her life for as long she could remember. Fear of God. Of sin. Of her own nature. She'd been raised a vicar's daughter. Her family was Church of England clergy for five generations on both sides, very serious—almost puritanical—about religion and God. Every Sunday of her childhood, she heard her father preach the terrors of sin and damnation.

"Sin is intentional disobedience and rebellion against God," he would tell the congregation. "Saint Paul clearly states that all have sinned and fallen short of God."

She was horrified. She must be very bad, I thought. I'm full of sin, she thought. Why couldn't she be better she'd ask herself. Why couldn't she be someone whom her father and, by extension, God, could be proud of? Someone they could love?

To punish herself, she started rationing food in her early teens. This was the mid-1970s. Nobody knew what to do with anorexic girls back then. She couldn't imagine that someone as worthless as she was deserved pleasure, and certainly not happiness. She felt so bad about herself that she just wanted to disappear. She got smaller and smaller, thinner and thinner. Her mother, fearing for her health, sent her to a psychiatric hospital.

Nurses stood watch at mealtimes and handed her a glass of milk every hour, along with sedatives. "Drink this, Joanna," they said. The nurses weren't unkind, but the patients scared her. She would watch them rock back and forth in chairs, lashing out seemingly at random. She was a sheltered teenager. She didn't know anything about mental illness and trauma. I need to gain enough weight to get out of here, she decided.

In three months, she put on enough weight that the doctors let her go home. She ate in front of her parents but purged in secret, developing bulimia. "You don't deserve this nourishment," she told herself. You are bad.

She hid her eating disorder into adulthood. She got married at 26 to a man 20 years her senior. But she admittedly looked at her marriage and it wasn't one of love; part of her just wanted to be useful and have kids. They had Richard only after years of trying to conceive.

By her early forties, Joanna was a shell of a person, trapped in a destructive cycle. Binge, purge, binge, purge. She agreed to adopt Gus and Bronwen not because she wanted horses but because she wanted to please her son. Maybe this was something she wouldn't fail at.

Yet here she was, three months later, calling in the experts. The horse whisperer and his assistant arrived, and she walked them to the paddock. As soon as she saw Joanna, Bronwen turned tail and ran to the opposite corner.

"I don't know what to do," she said, biting back her tears. "How do I show her that I don't want to hurt her?"

The horse whisperer opened the gate and walked calmly toward Bronwen. Her eyes, which had been wide with terror just moments earlier, softened. Her breathing steadied. "That's it, girl," he said. Within minutes, the man had Bronwen moving in circles, backing, stepping sideways and listening, her eyes fixed on him, mesmerized.

Joanna was stunned. Why can't I do that, she wondered?

"She's mirroring his behavior," the assistant said. "Horses respond to calm with calm, fear with fear."

A lump caught in her throat. How had she been communicating with Bronwen these past months? She imagined how she must appear to her: a woman whose fear and pain followed her into the paddock, whose whole body screamed “Danger!” No wonder Bronwen is scared, she thought. She’s only reacting to what she saw within Joanna. Gus too. He was responding to the part of her with no self-respect. If she couldn’t approach her horses with peace and positivity, how could she expect them to do the same?

Joanna tore through books about horses and healing. She paid close attention to how she approached Gus and Bronwen. No more rushing into the paddock, tense with anxiety and shame. Instead she would walk slowly toward Bronwen, studying every twitch of her ears, every ripple of her muscles, every shift in her energy. Becoming more aware of her body made me more aware of her own.

How am I feeling, Joanna asked herself? She focused, step by step, on her head, her heart, her stomach, her arms and legs. Every sensation was related to her fear, she noticed. She breathed out her negative feelings—you’re bad, you’re worthless—and Bronwen let Joanna come a bit nearer. Day by day, over many months, she and Joanna became friends.

One morning, she got nearer to Bronwen than I’d ever dared. Would she let me touch her, she wondered? Joanna centered herself with a deep breath. She’d spent decades convincing herself that she didn’t deserve a moment like this, a chance to feel peace, closeness. Could she break the cycle? She put out her hand. “That’s it, girl,” she said. Bronwen didn’t bolt, just watched her and waited. No fear in her eyes. Only curiosity. She glided her fingers gently down her mane, grazing her neck.

“Good girl,” she said, slipping her arms around her. She felt a great whoosh pass through them, almost like a divine spirit. Bronwen wrapped her head and neck around Joanna, embracing her. Such love and kindness! She and Joanna were part of the same herd, the same great universe. Joanna felt from Bronwen the goodness she’d pushed away her whole life, that she’d punished herself for feeling. Is it possible I’m not so worthless after all, she thought? Bronwen didn’t seem to think so. Maybe God didn’t think so either.

Joanna practiced meditation and breathing exercises daily to help manage her defeatist feelings. In, out. In, out. Was I really so bad? Did I need to punish myself? She’d ask. Pain and fear began to dissolve in her body, replaced by a new ease. She purged less and less until, two years after Bronwen came to live with them, she realized she didn’t want to do it anymore. It was as if God had used Bronwen’s love to give her permission to live without fear of judgment. To just be.

What if other people could benefit from horses like Bronwen, she wondered? Joanna wondered if she could create some sort of program to do that. So she started working

on what would later become the Natural Herd Model, an equine involvement therapy that she pioneered.

She'd learned from Bronwen and through her reading about an amazing phenomenon: Though individual horses can carry trauma, the herd naturally dissipates fear. If a horse—or even a human—enters the herd with fear, the others determine whether that fear is useful. Is danger close by? Does the herd need to protect itself and run away? If not, the herd lets the fear go. The fearful horse is reintegrated into the group, and the herd as a whole rebalances to its natural state of calm. A miracle of social equilibrium.

The numbers in their herd grew. Nine horses, then 15, eventually 21. Joanna moved to Wales, to a place with enough land for her horses to roam freely. She found clients, people searching for healing from their traumatic memories. She brought them to the paddock. She wanted to help her clients sort through their fear and shame and negative self-worth. They'd walk in together, and the horses would greet them.

“When we enter the herd, we become part of their natural rebalancing cycle,” she'd say. “Isn't that amazing? How does it feel to let go of what you've been carrying?” Over time, she saw that her own body was filled with the same loving energy she'd shared with Bronwen that day in the paddock all those years ago. She wasn't worthless, she finally realized. She didn't deserve punishment. She was just a human being, imperfect as all humans are. The horses knew that and didn't judge her. She could let go of the self-hatred she'd carried for most of her life. She didn't have to fear. Not her father. Not God. Not her own nature.

Joanna says she came to the realization that God wasn't an external force of damnation but a light inside that made all things possible, even a recovery from a 30-year battle with anorexia and bulimia. If ever she needs a reminder, she only has to watch Bronwen and the other horses roam the paddock. Happy and free and at peace with themselves. The way she is and deserve to be. A miracle in the making.

So, too, is the way we all deserve to be. But how do we get there and help others to do the same?

It is “fear” we are told that causes the disciples to be locked. But through the power of God, that fear is dispelled.

“Peace be with you” are the first words of our Lord. He's not coming to settle the score about why they abandoned Him. Not coming to shame. Not coming to judge. But to give them peace. And much like with those horses and Joanna as she learned from the horse whisperer, there is the transformation. The disciples we are told rejoiced upon knowing it is the Lord.

As a starting point, it's so important to know how much we are loved by God. Like Joanna, we too can sometimes have shame. But Jesus invites us to turn it over to Him. Today is also known as Divine Mercy Sunday, which focuses on how loving and

merciful our Lord is. In his appearance to Sister Faustina Kowalska, the Polish Saint, who had a vision of Christ that led to this feast being established. She wrote that Christ told her: "Let no soul fear to draw near to Me, even though its sins be as scarlet. My mercy is so great that no mind, be it of man or of angel, will be able to fathom it throughout all eternity." The image you may have seen of it illustrates that beautifully. Jesus is always going to meet us right where we are at. We see that too in Thomas. Notice that although he is absent at first, when he is there the second time and says he will not believe until he sees the wounds and touches the side, there is no judgment on the part of Jesus. He does not scold Thomas or shame him; rather, as with the others, He meets Thomas where Thomas is at; it's as if He's saying "OK Tom, I know you are skeptical and need some evidence, so let me show you." And so Thomas touches the wounds, and then makes that beautiful leap of faith. I love Thomas because he is so easy to relate to. Like him, we wander (as he was not present with the others, we can wonder from loved ones and from the Church), and like him sometimes we just need more proof. But because we still have faith in our hearts, even if it's not as strong as it should be, God is still going to work with it. And whenever we come back, God is going to be there to welcome us with open arms. But, like Thomas, we also have to make a move towards our Lord. So first, I'd hope that you'd just daily ask yourselves where you are at in your faith life. Maybe you've fallen away, done horrible things, do things you don't tell people about or hide your secrets out of shame. Maybe like Joanna you carry these things, be it your past or other anxieties over things in your life, and just need to turn them over to Jesus. Trust in His mercy. Let it set you free as it did for John.

With that though, we also want to look at how we can do this for others. Jesus said to them again "Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, so I send you." We are sent; sent to bring peace into the world. But we need to ask ourselves how we do that too. Sometimes this means asking ourselves some uncomfortable questions at times.

For instance, how do our family members perceive us? If we are always on edge, if we are high strung with anxiety, if we have anger stemming from other things in our life, these things will come out. Maybe we are burying them and not blowing up in front of others, but our pets, our kids, our spouses, people who know us, they will sense tension. Sometimes even if we don't want to come across that way a person may sense, like Joanna did as a child, that there is something wrong with them, or that they are a bad person, or that you are angry with them even if you aren't. So when we look at ourselves, we ask ourselves what in my life do I have to address and turn over to God? What do I need to let go of? How to I become a happier, peaceful person?

Doing that though may entail having deeper conversations with others too. For instance, if we really want to bring peace to our loved ones, sometimes a person needs to be aware of what is going on and their decisions and confront them too. Sometimes we are subtly angry with someone and they sense it, but we're not talking about why we are really upset, and it may be justifiable. If a family member is making poor life choices that are impacting them and the family, and that is being ignored, or maybe a person is changing their behavior little by little and we never mention it out of fear of upsetting them, not only are we not finding peace, but so too are they not going to find peace. So

with the love that God gives us, to truly help others, sometimes we have to shine a mirror on them too so they can look at themselves and go to confession, return to Church, make things right in their lives and with their families. We can't force these things, and they take time, but little by little we too can help set others free.

And lastly, like the apostles we are sent. So who is God sending us to? Who needs peace? At Mass on Friday with the kids, I read a wonderful children's book called "The Smallest Girl in the Smallest Grade" about Sally, who isn't noticed by the other kids or deemed "important" but who spends her time watching everything around her, and she sees the bullying, the gossip, the indifference, and so one day in the cafeteria she raises her voice and says "stop!" and invites everyone to raise a hand who wants to make a difference. We need to be like that; as I've said a million times we do not give up on the world, but engage it. So how can we evangelize? How can we articulate the faith to people? Through our actions, through our prayers, and through not being afraid to talk about what we believe in but rather to engage the world with the faith.

In our lives, it's easy to run from the past; its why you see it so often as a plot in movies. The past inevitably catches up with us though and can't be run from. God though does something about it. He sends us the Son, and gives us love and mercy. Just as the wounds of the past are on the resurrected Body of Jesus, the wounds of sin are on our souls too. We can cover them, but they remain. Let us uncover them though for our Lord and realize just how deeply He loves us, by not hiding in the darkness of shame, but rather realizing what Joanna did - that no longer need we live in fear. Rather, we just need to live in the light of God's mercy by letting it truly set us free by opening our souls and hearts to the Lord who gives us peace, and then taking the peace we have been given and giving it to the world.