

Sermon Easter II 2017

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

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“Peace, sending, receive the Holy Spirit, forgiving”

We celebrated Easter in grand fashion last Sunday. Now we have entered the great 50 days of Easter leading up to the Feast of Pentecost. At least that is the story told in Matthew and Luke. But the Gospel of John presents a different story of that first Easter Day. For John, Pentecost and Easter are synonymous and the Holy Spirit arrives on the evening of that first day in the story we just heard.

While we greet with joy the arrival of Easter that is not how Jesus’ followers experienced it. On the evening of Easter day, ten of the disciples were huddled in fear inside a locked room. They weren’t just afraid, the text uses the Greek term, phobia, from which we get our term phobia or phobic. So the disciples were more than afraid, they were paralyzed with fear.

There were many reasons for their fear. They feared the Roman authorities because of what they had done to Jesus. It was only natural that they would feel vulnerable as well. They might be next. We heard something of that fear in Peter’s denials on the evening that Jesus was arrested. And they may also be concerned if the rumors are true that Jesus has returned from the dead. A reunion with Jesus, may also be a cause for fear, given the fact that they had failed Jesus miserably. There was good reason for their fear, their phobia.

I think we know something of the fear that the disciples felt. Now our situation is not the same but nonetheless, we’ve come to know fear in our day as well. Terror, abuse, violence, identity theft, dishonest, etc. So much in the culture would have us close in, draw back, not risk. Just the opposite of what Jesus is saying. So Jesus’ message is just as valid for us.

When fear has been developed into a science, it assaults us at every turn. Fear has become a part of our culture.

Into that locked room filled with despair and fear, Jesus mysteriously materialized. Jesus came to them in the midst of their fear and the first words out of his mouth were “Peace be with you.” Jesus repeated this greeting three times, underscoring its importance. The Biblical words here are “*shalom*” and “*eirene*.” This means “completeness, welfare, health” a state in which everything is as it should be...” (From a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Delmer L. Chilton, quoted at [www.lectionarylab.com](http://www.lectionarylab.com) 4/22/14).

Jesus comes into the midst of his fearful friends, and gives them the gift of peace with themselves and the world. It is a peace that descends upon their hearts and spirits as a gift from God. This peace is a most mysterious thing, for it is not tied to nor dependent upon external circumstances. Jesus extends a peace that is not linked to how well we’re doing in our job or how well we’re getting along with our family or how much money we have in our savings account or how well our retirement fund is doing. This is the “peace that surpasses all understanding”

After Jesus comforted the disciples, after he calmed their fears with his peace, **Jesus commissioned them**, “As the father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus came to this disheartened and directionless group and gave them a reason for living. He defined for them a purpose, laid out for them their future; put in front of them their mission.

Bishop John Spong, a former rector of St. John’s in his recent book on the Gospel of John says, “This resurrection experience is not designed to convince the disciples that Jesus has been raised; it is intended to convince them that they have a responsibility to fulfill: They are the bearers of the resurrected life that must be shared with the world.” (Spong, *The Fourth Gospel, Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, p. 295).

When Jesus showed them his wounds, it was not just a way of identifying himself, not just a way of proving to them that it was really him. No! In showing them his wounds, his scars, Jesus also shows them who they were, and what they were to do.

Suddenly, things he said begin to make sense. Things like “take up your cross,” and “losing one’s life for the Gospel,” things that seemed so peculiar when

he said them, begin to shout out their meaning as the disciples stare at his wounds. “Now I get it,” they think. “Now I understand. We are called to serve the world, to live for the world, to die for the world if necessary, because that’s what Jesus did.”

In the third action of his appearance that evening, Jesus empowered his disciples. He breathed on them and said, **‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’** God provides what is needed to fulfill God’s purposes. God works through our sometimes feeble efforts to accomplish God’s will in the world. This is shown to us in Christ on the Cross, which was not an exercise of power, but a demonstration of humility and obedience and faith. God’s promise is to fill us with the Holy Spirit, to provide for us that which we need in order to do what we are called to do.

So too, Jesus is empowering his disciples and us for mission. The commission in John’s gospel, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” is an ongoing one. We are a people who are sent. Now if we are cowering in fear we can do nothing. But if we truly believe that we have received the Spirit of God, we have what we need. Because we are accompanied by the divine initiative that supports us. And that makes all the difference.

Jesus sends us forth to share the story of his resurrection. “To bring the message of peace and joy of the Risen Jesus to future generations of disciples.” (Synthesis 4/27/14, p. 1). To make disciples of all nations by baptizing them as we did last Sunday. And this mission has at its core the ministry of forgiveness.

This is a remarkable aspect of the Christian experience, this call to forgiveness. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven but if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Don’t we know that to be true?

Each of us been wronged by others, some of us in profound ways. We know how hard it can be to forgive. But there is immense wisdom in Jesus’ teaching. As our Savior taught us, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” If we hold onto the sin and the harm it has caused, if we treasure it, if we hold onto the hurt and wrong as right as that seems it can define us. We all need forgiveness and we also need to grant forgiveness as well.

Forgiveness is not an easy concept for our culture. We tend to emphasize retribution and justice more than forgiveness. We cling to our hurts; we are not quick to give them up or to forgive. And yet, a wise person once said, “I am not what happened to me, but who I chose to become.” We have to let go, we have to forgive if we are to move on. If we are to grow into the disciples that God is calling us to be.

The writer, Anne Lamott, said in an interview, “I have a relationship with a God who is so tender and so willing to keep letting me start over. It’s like that old Christian saying: God loves us exactly the way we are, but far too much to let us stay this way. That’s really been my experience. I can’t blot it so badly that God doesn’t still love me - and I can also feel in me the stirrings of wanting to get a little bit cleaner on the inside and a little bit quieter and a little bit less self-driven.”

When Jesus entered that locked room on Easter night long ago, Jesus extended his arms of love offering peace to his friends who had earlier betrayed him. Then he commissioned them to go into the world accompanied by the Holy Spirit. They were to share God’s love and offer God’s forgiveness. We are the inheritors of their effective ministry now two millennia later.

What does that look like? Yesterday was just another Spring Saturday with lots of opportunity for ministry. There was the March for Science, Earth Day observations, the Opera Gala and Lynchstock. But in Leesburg, VA, an Episcopal Church was committed to another cause. They had learned over the past six months of people locked in their houses in fear. These are immigrants with children who are U.S. citizens. They are fearful for the ongoing care of their children if their they should be arrested. Who will care for a diabetic child if her parents are taken away without notice? So the parish went to work. Many parishioners went to the City Clerk’s office and paid \$40 to become a Notary Public. They recruited translators and attorneys to assist people on Saturday in their parish hall as they drew up Guardianship papers and Powers of Attorney should they be needed to transfer care of their children. Fear is ever-present but with this planning some of these parent’s fears were allayed.

And Jesus' call continues to disciples in every age. "We have been gifted with God's peace in Jesus, we are called to our won pace and to the making of peace in our world. As disciples and as children of God it is our task to seek for ways in which to make the forgiveness, justice, mercy, and love of God visible in a world where violence and enmity are too often the norm." (*An Easter Sourcebook*, Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988.)

Jesus sent the disciples forth empowered by the Holy Spirit and Jesus is sending us forth as well. May we follow in the disciples footsteps and respond.