

## SO, NOW WHAT?

Psalm 116

John 20:19-31

Highland Park Presbyterian Church

April 19, 2020

If there's ever been a Sunday when the lectionary text seemed vital and alive; a Sunday when the text wrapped us up in a story that reminds us of our own; a Sunday when we feel like we're actually there; this is it. Couldn't you just imagine yourself with those disciples of 2000 years ago, socially isolated, huddled in a locked room that first Easter evening following the dizzying events of the previous few days? Couldn't you feel in your bones that fear of going outside for fear of being recognized, injured, or killed? Couldn't you just tremble at those world-changing unforeseen events that had gone on in your world, killing a close friend and leader, upending the very activities and hopes you'd had for years? We could be forgiven for feeling like we were there.

They had made the long trek from Galilee to Jerusalem with Rabbi Jesus to celebrate Passover. They may have sensed some trepidation about the risks of Jesus' constant reminders that the Kin-dom of God was among them; they may have understood the challenges that message posed to the powers that be. But in the last few days they had seen its deadly consequences. Jesus had been arrested, tried and executed. Their dreams of a new rule had crumbled. But there were also those rumors of an empty tomb and the women who claimed to have seen him alive. How confusing is that! So they hid in a locked room, as John tells us, not for fear of a virus, but "for fear of the Jews."

Can you imagine? Less than four days before, this band of Jesus' followers had celebrated the Passover. According to the Easter narratives in John's Gospel, shortly after that Seder, Rabbi Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem. He was tried twice, once by the religious authorities and once by the Roman governor; he was beaten and humiliated, and finally led to Golgotha, where he was crucified and died. His body was buried in a tomb, long after all of these disciples had fled the terrifying scene – all but the women, of course, and one of the men, whom tradition identifies as John himself; they had remained with Jesus. Heaven only knows where they fled,

but come Sunday morning, after the Sabbath, these disciples got word from the women, then Peter and John, that the tomb was empty, and early reports were circulating that he had risen from the dead. What they knew, or thought, beyond that we can only imagine.

John's description of their location is revealing: "the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews." This was one fearful bunch of disciples. What could that mean, apart that is, from the anti-Semitic uses to which such language has been put for centuries? These disciples were also Jews, of course. It helps to remember first that this Gospel was the last of the four Gospels to be written (though perhaps about the same time as Matthew) – sometime during the last two decades of the first century. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 Common Era, and synagogues scattered around the eastern Mediterranean had become the centers of Jewish worship in its stead. Jesus and most of his followers, remember, were Jews and for some time attended synagogue "religiously." But synagogue rulers were systematically attempting to purify and regularize Jewish thought and practice after Jerusalem's fall, and the practice of excommunication had arisen as a way of ridding the faith of members of several competing sects that had arisen within Judaism. So these are the earliest readers of John's Gospel, and as they heard this story, they, like us, could undoubtedly have seen themselves huddled in that private room.

It is to this frightened band of followers that Jesus appears, and his words of greeting are telling – "Peace be with you." After showing them his wounds, he repeats himself; "Peace be with you." This was clearly a group in need of reassurance. Then he commissions them and breathes on them, and invites them to receive the Holy Spirit. Jewish readers would have undoubtedly heard echoes of Genesis 2, when God breathes into Adam the very breath of new life. But the text is surprisingly silent about the disciples' reaction, other than what they reported to the missing Thomas: "We have seen the Lord."

This text is included in the lectionary for the Second Sunday of Easter every year. So, much like the Christmas and Easter readings, we get to revisit them often. And most sermons about this text single out Thomas the Twin – or more popularly, Doubting Thomas, the one who refuses to take the other disciples' word for it that Jesus is alive. He wants to see for himself. And most of us have come to understand that passage as dealing less with doubt and more with Thomas's desire to experience Christ's presence personally – to see, to touch, to believe.

But this Sunday we read the story a little differently. Those terrified disciples huddled behind locked doors take center stage today, because we know what that feels like. Today they don't seem so cowardly, but careful. Like us, they had really good reasons to be afraid. They could have been rounded up by the authorities who desperately wanted to stamp out this early Jesus movement. They could have been attacked by anyone who recognized them as Jesus' disciples, or maybe run out of town, or ridiculed. They had no real idea what to expect, how safe it was outside.

Then somehow, behind locked doors, Jesus appears to them. No matter how hard they tried to hide, Jesus found them; no matter how afraid they were, Jesus joins them. Of course the description prompts all kinds of questions. How could a risen Christ walk through locked doors? If he had a "real" body, wouldn't he have had to break down the door or come in the back way? Those are questions about a mystery, of course, because the Resurrection wasn't about a dead body simply coming back to life, but a transformed Christ. A Christ that Mary was not permitted to touch because he was returning to God. He just had important work to do first.

And he could be uttering those very same words to us today whenever he finds us huddled in our homes, and afraid. "Peace be with you." Well, there's precious little of that kind of peace around these days. Many of our communities are making progress in "flattening the curve," lowering hospital and death rates, while others have yet to see the peak of the waves that continue to cross our nation. There is good reason for hope, but not for complacency. In the words of many medical experts, it is not time to let our foot off the accelerator. Not a time to let down our guard and relax our vigilance. Peace does not yet come to us from the outside.

But in the inner recesses of our homes and lives, Christ enters with the same greeting – "Peace be with you." We remember when we could speak those same words to each other as we gathered in worship. Passing the peace. Now we must speak them over the phone or internet. But it is not an easy peace, not one we can generate ourselves. This kind of peace does not come from mindfulness and meditation, no matter how effective those practices are. This is a Christ-breathed peace that "passes all understanding."

We long for inner peace, for relief from the daily anxieties about health and life and family and finances. Sometimes we'd settle for a good night's sleep. And

those are noble objects of our prayers, worthy desires. But in this morning's text Jesus is doing much more than making the disciples feel better. He *repeats* the offer of peace, maybe to make sure they got it, and then he makes a fascinating claim: "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." Well, that escalated quickly! You mean inner peace is not just for me? You gave me this gift for some other purpose?

Well, indeed, it turns out, he did. In chapter 14, before the mystifying events of Holy Week, John tells us that Jesus was preparing his disciples for what was to come. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." The peace at the center of our relationship with God is deeper and more lasting than the everyday peace we look for. But it is also given for a purpose – Jesus' disciples were to continue his work once he is gone. More truly than the Blues Brothers, they were to embark on a mission from God.

In about six weeks we will be celebrating Pentecost Sunday – often referred to as the birthday of the church. The book of Acts describes the disciples gathered in another room, this one open to the multitude of visitors from many nations who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Weeks. Suddenly the Holy Spirit descends upon those who are gathered, and everyone hears the Gospel in their own language. In one world-changing event, the Holy Spirit is given to the church, and the Gospel would then spread throughout the world.

But for John, today's text is Pentecost. Jesus breathes on the disciples and proclaims, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Those early Jewish readers would have easily recognized the description of God breathing life into the first human beings in Genesis 2, but this time it is God's spirit filling their lives and preparing them to go out into the world. And not only were they to witness to Christ's life, death, and resurrection, but they were to preach forgiveness. This truly was to be a mission from God.

Peace and mission: they belong together. Who knew? Yes, we want centeredness, balance, safe places. And we desperately need those in these turbulent times. But peace cannot be the end, because we are granted that peace for a purpose. Complicated language that is – purpose, mission. We spend a lot of time reflecting on what our mission is, what we are called to be and do. And it is not just in the church. Corporations, volunteer groups, families all ponder what they are about, how they can tailor their activities to their core values. And that is important.

But it can sometimes be confusing, shifting, and unsettled as we try to get clarity. You will have many opportunities in the weeks and months ahead to think about the mission of Highland Park Presbyterian Church, to discern as specifically as you can what God is calling you to be and do in the years ahead. And there will be different ideas about that mission – some of you may be called to more careful spiritual formation within the congregation, others to more service in the community, to more careful stewardship, or to bridging political divides.

But perhaps a good starting point is simpler. Noted Christian author Parker Palmer has written that "the mission of the church is not to enlarge its membership, not to bring outsiders to accept its terms, but simply to love the world in every possible way--to love the world as God did and does." Wait. Did I say simpler? The more I've thought about that claim this week, the more complicated it has become. Love the world in every possible way? Love the word as God does? What could that mean?

That, of course, remains to be seen. But I suspect it begins with recognizing the Christ who finds his way past those locked doors we are tempted to erect and offers us peace. Perhaps, like the disciples, we start by claiming, "We have seen the Lord." And surely it means that when we do recognize him, like Thomas, we can't help but utter the words, "My Lord and my God."

Amen