

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

EASTER FORGIVENESS

A Christian scholar, W.D. Davies once asked his preacher,

"Why do we hear so few Easter sermons on forgiveness? In my read of the resurrection, I think it's as much a story about forgiveness as it is a story about victory over death. I would say that forgiveness is at the heart of the story of the resurrection."

I think Davies had a point. Forgiveness is an important part of the resurrection story. And that's what I want us to focus on this morning.

You'll notice that our lesson for today begins with a word of forgiveness.

2

FEAR

The disciples are still living behind locked doors. They are still afraid.

It's hard to be faithful when you are filled with fear. Remember the message of the angel at the tomb? Don't be afraid.

But, despite our best efforts fear is a persistent problem. The women left the empty tomb with great joy but the Bible tells us that they were also still afraid.

And fear persisted with the disciples as well. Their doors were still locked for fear of the Jewish leaders. If they crucified Jesus maybe they would have them crucified too.

Preacher Craig Barnes tells of the time his family moved into an apartment in South Chicago. The door on the apartment had four locks! You have to wonder what kind of neighborhood you're moving into when the door has four locks.

He said that the benefit was mainly psychological. When they went to bed at night, they derived some comfort from shutting out the world and hearing the click, click, click as they turned the levers of the locks.

That's how many of us cope with our fears. We keep our hearts behind a door with lots of locks. We try to keep out all those things that make us afraid.

On the night of the first Easter, the disciples were huddled behind a locked door. They were profoundly afraid.

FEAR AND SIN

And it was this fear that caused the disciples to sin. This fear prevented the disciples from standing with Jesus in his hour of need, and this fear kept them in hiding.

I think that the disciples were not only afraid of facing those who killed Jesus. I think the disciples were also afraid of facing their own failure. They were ashamed.

Like those disciples, we too try to hide because we are ashamed. We keep the door to our hearts tightly locked because we know the truth. We have not been the people we want to be. We have not lived up to the high calling that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Hiding our shame takes a lot of energy. It cripples our spiritual and psychological growth. We lock up more doors in our life. We seal off more possibilities in an effort to keep ourselves safe. We think that we are keeping the world out, but really we are keeping ourselves locked in.

PEACE BE WITH YOU

The first miracle of the resurrection is that Jesus breaks through the fear. The doors are locked, but Jesus walks right into their presence.

Fear was no match for the power of the risen Christ. And Jesus gives the disciples what they so desperately need. He gives them a word of forgiveness. He says, "Peace be with you."

Peace is not just the absence of conflict. Peace is not just a warm fuzzy feeling. Peace is Jesus coming into our fearful, closed down, locked up world and speaking a word of forgiveness. Jesus tells us,

"Yes, you have failed me. Yes, you are afraid and depressed and feeling alone. But, I'm not going to leave you alone. I'm going to break through those walls of guilt and shame. I'm going to come into your life in a new way. I'm going to bring you peace."

THE CROSS AND FORGIVENESS

And how does Jesus make that peace a reality to these fearful disciples? He shows the disciples his nailed-scarred hands and the cruel wound that was made in his side.

Maybe the disciples made the connection with the Passover meal they shared with him not so long ago. That meal in which he said, "This is my body broken for you."

Peter would spell it out later in his first letter. He wrote,

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24)

We often speak about the fact that Jesus died for our sins on the cross. But, sometimes it is hard to understand exactly what that means.

With the disciples the connection is more direct. In some ways his wounds were a direct result of the fear and unfaithfulness of the disciples.

4

Can you imagine how painful that first encounter with Jesus could have been? Jesus could have said, "Why did you guys run away? Why didn't you stay with me and pray for me in my time of need? I need to get some new disciples!"

But, Jesus didn't say that. There were no accusations. There were no recriminations.

Instead, Jesus simply said, "Peace be with you."

That is the power of the risen Christ. It is the power of a phrase I use every week after our confession of sin.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

We hear that every week. We talk about the grace and forgiveness of God in Christ a lot.

PROCLAIMING A WORD OF FORGIVENESS

But, in my experience we have a hard time living that promise. And living the promise of forgiveness is the first step in following the risen Christ.

Look again at our lesson for today. Jesus tells the fearful disciples, "Peace be with you." And then Jesus moves immediately from that word of forgiveness to a call to discipleship. Jesus said, "I'm sending you just as the Father has sent me." The Bible tells us that he then breathed upon them. The Spirit of the risen Christ now lived in those disciples.

And what did that mean? What would it look like to be bearers of the Spirit of Christ? It would mean bringing a word of forgiveness to a guilt-ridden world. The disciples were given the daunting task of bringing forgiveness into a world that preferred to point a finger of blame.

Think of it. It all depended upon them. If they didn't bring the message, the word of forgiveness would not be heard. (John 20:23) The success of the kingdom depended upon how well they could convey the love and forgiveness of Jesus in a hostile and unforgiving world.

Considering what had gone on just a few days before, considering how they had betrayed their Lord and had run away into the darkness in fear, the likelihood of their success didn't seem too great.

THE BLAME GAME

The same could be said of those who lead the church today.

We have not had the best track record, especially those of us who worship in the so-called mainline church. A long time ago someone said that the mainline church had become sidelined. We have gone through what one writer called a couple “decades of real despondency.” He wrote,

“We have collectively declined in our membership by the millions. Many of us worship in half-empty churches. The majority of our churches are in decline and few are growing.”

So what’s the answer?

Some of us might say, “Our clergy should have worked harder.” Can I get an “amen” to that?

And then the clergy might say, “Those lay people should have been more courageous and enthusiastic about winning others to Christ.”

I might not get an “amen” to that from you, but trust me a group of clergy would be quick to “amen” that statement.

There are lots of reasons we have failed. We should have invited people to church. We should have been more hospitable and welcoming. We should have been more inclusive and welcoming.

It’s true. It’s all true. We should have been all that and more.

For years now when we get together and talk about the future of the mainline church we do a lot of finger pointing. If only those liberals had been more conservative! If only those conservatives had been more liberal!

But, I wonder if the real problem is that we have forgotten that our main message is a message of forgiveness.

That’s the message we need to hear, and it’s the message the world needs to hear.

LOW SUNDAY HIGH

We call this Sunday after Easter “low Sunday.” Last week was such a big grand service; the week after always seems so small in comparison. And yet it is often in our low times that we really get to see the power of the resurrection for ourselves.

Think about how “low” those first disciples must have felt as they met behind closed doors on that Easter evening. All of them had betrayed their faith and the Lord that they loved.

I wonder if the finger pointing had already begun. Can you imagine the conversation? “Peter, Jesus said that you were supposed to be our rock. If you hadn’t denied Jesus maybe things would have been different.”

And to that Peter might have replied, “Well, if you guys hadn’t run away, if you had stayed and had given me a little support, maybe I could have kept my nerve.”

Judas may have been the only one to commit suicide out of regret for his betrayal, but make no mistake about it. They all betrayed Jesus. If they were tempted to point the finger of blame at their brother, there were four fingers pointing back at them.

I wonder. What would have happened to this band of despondent disciples if the risen Christ hadn’t come among them? Might their fate have eventually been the same as that of Judas?

But, it didn’t happen that way. Their lives did not end in despair.

The Bible tells us that when Jesus came and stood among them things changed. They came out from behind those locked doors. They began to tell others about what they had seen. The men and women who encountered the risen Christ were reborn. It was like they were totally different people.

BREATHE ON ME

The key to understanding why this happened is found in that curious action recorded in our lesson for today. Jesus breathed on his disciples.

Does that remind you of another story? When God created the world he breathed the breath of life into human beings. Jesus is doing it all again. He is breathing the breath of new life into his disciples.

This is John's description of Pentecost. This John's way of saying what the apostle Paul once wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, he (or she) is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

I used to play tennis with an elderly professor in Atlanta. Sometimes we would take on stronger opponents in a game of doubles and would soon fall a few games behind. He would always whisper to me as we walked to the other side of the court,

"We've got them just where we want them, overconfident!"

In a similar way I wonder if when we are losing, when we are at a low point in our life, God has us right where He wants us.

When we are weak, when we are struggling, we do not trust in our own abilities. Instead, we long for the Spirit of the living God to fall on us.

The Apostle Paul had some kind of physical problem, and he prayed that the Lord would take it away. But, Paul said that God gave him this answer, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul concluded, "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Nobody needs a Savior when things are going well. But, when it's Low Sunday, when our life is filled with trouble and fear, when the doors of our life are locked, then we are ready for a visit from the risen Christ.

SINS ARE FORGIVEN

And when we're filled with guilt, the Spirit of the risen Christ not only forgives us but also enables us to forgive others as well. We can get beyond pointing the finger of blame and others, and get on with following Jesus.

Did you ever notice how Jesus was always going up to people and saying, "Your sins are forgiven?" Many of the people Jesus forgives did not repent or say that they were sorry for their sins. Jesus just walks up to them and forgives them; pre-emptive, extravagant forgiveness was at the heart of Jesus' ministry.

And Jesus commanded us to be pre-emptive, extravagant forgivers as well. Jesus even taught us to forgive our enemies. When Jesus taught us how to pray in the Lord's Prayer, he didn't tell us to bring all our aches and pains before our Heavenly Father. Instead, he talked about forgiveness. He told us to ask for forgiveness as we forgive those who have wronged us.

8

And of course we remember every year on Good Friday that as he hung on the cross he looked out down at those who persecuted him and said, "Father forgive them."

And on Easter evening Jesus practices what he preached. The first thing the risen Christ does is return to his disciples. He forgives those who betrayed him ... those who proved to be his worst enemies as well as his closest friends.

I have found that it is hard to forgive our enemies, but it is even harder to forgive friends who betray us. Jesus forgives his disciples and establishes a community based upon forgiveness.

If you are going to be a part of the community that follows Jesus, you are going to have to learn about forgiveness. You'll have to learn to receive forgiveness, and you'll have to learn about giving forgiveness as well. There will be many opportunities to practice!

THOMAS

And it wasn't long before those first disciples got a chance to practice forgiveness. One of the disciples, Thomas wasn't there when Jesus came and proclaimed his peace.

And though the disciples talked about their encounter with Jesus in glowing terms, Thomas didn't buy it. Thomas said, "Unless I see and touch for myself, I will not believe." He was saying in essence that the other disciples were crazy.

But, notice that the disciples don't reject Thomas, and Thomas doesn't reject the other disciples. The next week he is still with them when Jesus comes again. And this time Thomas gets to see Jesus, and he believes.

Sometimes forgiveness means having the patience to wait for the Spirit of Jesus to come into a person's life.

I don't know about you, but there have been doubters in my family. There have been people in my life who have rejected the message and forgiveness of Christ. And sometimes it felt like they were rejecting me, and what I believed in most deeply.

To tell you the truth it sometimes made me very angry.

But, we kept in touch. We kept coming back to help that person in their time of need. And one day the Spirit of Christ broke down their walls of disbelief. One day they met the Spirit of the risen Christ, and that changed everything.

HOW CAN WE BELIEVE?

Note that Thomas didn't need to touch Jesus after all. Seeing him was enough.

But, we haven't even seen Jesus. How can we believe? How can we be among those who have not seen and yet believe, those whom Jesus calls blessed? (John 19:29) Where can we find the patience to forgive those who doubt us and hurt us?

We may not be able to see Jesus. We may not be able to put our hand in the nail-scarred hand. But, the story of Thomas tells us that we don't need to touch. We don't even need to see.

The important thing to remember is that the Spirit of the risen Christ, the Spirit of God's grace and forgiveness is alive and well in us today. We can forgive because God in Christ breathes on us and enables us to do the work of Jesus even today.

Thankfully, we don't have to produce forgiveness. Instead, we are called to be priests. We are called to tell about that forgiveness that has already been produced on the cross.

We are called to open the locks. We are called to open the door and walk back into the world as God's joyous prophet and priest. We called to give up our fear and embrace our faith.

The only alternative is to live in the shrinking prison of our own hurt and pain.

God help us all hear and live the good news.
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Amen.