

Faith Mennonite Church
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Peace, resurrection wounds, and a call to forgiveness
John 20:19-31

Each Easter Sunday Christians around the world sing hymns of victory:

“The strife is o’er, the battle done,”

“Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son!”

“Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o’er his foes!”

But it wasn’t that immediately clear to the disciples, even though they had heard Jesus say that he would die and rise again. His death had been so brutal, so agonizing, that most of the disciples kept their distance as he hung on the cross. Only the women stayed close, and in John’s gospel, “the beloved disciple,” whose identity is never entirely clear.

In the early hours of the morning on the day of resurrection, Mary Magdalene had found the tomb empty, and was distraught that she couldn’t spend time with Jesus’ body. She was sure he had been carried away. Her story was told last Sunday, how she came to recognize the risen Lord and how he sent her to carry the news of his resurrection to the other disciples.

But something didn’t connect for them. On that same evening, where our scripture reading picks up this morning, those disciples are not celebrating triumphantly, they are locked away, in fear. All, that is, but Thomas, but we will return to his story in a bit.

What wasn’t to fear? It had been a brutalizing week. No one could be certain that the frenzy generated by the temple leadership would not continue on after Jesus was executed. Even though Jesus, as John’s gospel tells the story, spent an extended time preparing his disciples and reassuring them that “they would not be left desolate,” that he would send a new “advocate and comforter,” that his peace would remain with them (John 14), the trauma they had just lived through made it difficult to remember these words of assurance.

So they huddled in fear, behind locked doors. No doubt every one of us has huddled in fear at some point, whether the locks were literal or figurative. We’ve found ourselves alone at the wrong place at the wrong time...we’ve been in a relationship that has gone terribly wrong and we no longer feel safe ...we’ve come to recognize that our core identity is not what others believe and that being open about it might bring rejection, if not outright violence...we’ve become aware of unethical practices in our workplace or we are being treated unjustly, yet we need the financial security. This week as we’ve commemorated the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we have heard testimony to the fear that his family, and the movement he led, experienced as death threats mounted, as peaceful demonstrations were met with hateful, militant brutality.

In the midst of that fear, fortified by locked doors, Jesus appeared to his disciples. He didn’t berate, “Oh you of little faith,” as he had sometimes done when they were slow to catch on. Like a good teacher he reminded them of what he had taught...of what they knew they should expect: Peace! This was no fluffy peace, no “don’t worry about a thing, cuz every little thing’s gonna be all right.” This was strong, serious peace; peace that bore the wounds of the cross in his hands, his feet, and his side. These were the marks that brought recognition. These were the marks that brought joy. Jesus had moved through his fear, all the way through death, and God had brought him back, bodily present, wounds and all, to reassure them.

The peace he brought wasn’t simply a greeting but a commissioning: “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” And in an act of recreation, as the wind of God had breathed over the waters at creation, Jesus breathes on them and says, “Receive Holy Spirit.” This is John’s Pentecost. It is intimate, as Jesus breathes the Spirit that has animated him into this community of his followers. He does this not to simply

comfort, but to energize, to enliven, to empower them to carry on the work that he began. He specifies that this work is forgiveness, perhaps the hardest of all work!

The translation of this charge, as it comes to us in English, sounds daunting and a bit heavy handed: “If we forgive the sins of another, they are forgiven; if we do not forgive they are retained, or according to some translations, not forgiven.” A closer look at the Greek words that are used here, shows that the word translated as “forgive” is actually “release.” And the word translated as “retain” or “not forgive” can mean “to hold fast,” or “control,” or “overcome.” Both of these, the releasing and the holding fast, can be redemptive. We release the things of the past, our sins, the wrongs done to us that cannot be relived or changed. We release them so they will have no power over us. But sin that is current, an ongoing conflict, harmful behavior, hurtful actions, lies that are told: the Christian community holds these fast, takes them seriously, in order to hold one another accountable, in order to shed light on the truth, so that they can be transformed. The goal is not to leave someone outside, captive to forces beyond their control, but to hold them fast in a process of transformation. True peace. Peace that bears witness to the wounds.

Before we return to Thomas, I’d like to jump ahead to the final chapter of John since we will pass over it next Sunday and move into stories from the book of Acts. The final two verses of John 20 sound like words of completion, the end of the story: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³But 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.” The end.

But there must have been someone in community where this gospel was written, perhaps at a later date, after the writer thought the gospel was complete, who raised their hand and said, “One more story!” Maybe it was someone struggling with coming to terms with things in their past that they found hard to release, or something in their current life that they could not fully overcome.

That “one more story” recounts another resurrection appearance by Jesus. The disciples are no longer huddled behind closed doors; they’ve returned to something familiar. They’ve gone fishing. When they return to the shore after a night of casting nets, Jesus awaits them on the beach. He makes breakfast for them and they eat...just like old times. And then, in the presence of everyone, he begins a conversation with Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him—the same number of times Peter had denied Jesus after his arrest. And after each affirmation, Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.” It was no easier for Peter than it is for anyone of us when someone confronts us with something we have done that we deeply regret. But there is nothing more redemptive than being given a new task, to begin again, after we failed miserably. This is a perfect illustration of what Jesus expected his beloved community, filled with his Spirit, to experience and offer to one another.

Finally, we circle back to Thomas. What’s the nickname we use for Thomas? (Doubting Thomas). It’s a bit of a misnomer. The word “doubt” doesn’t appear in the text. Thomas was no different from the other disciples in wanting and needing a first-hand experience with the Risen Christ. Mary Magdalene needed and received her encounter in the garden. The other disciples, afraid behind closed doors, needed and received their encounter. Thomas needed the assurance that the others hadn’t simply seen a vision. He would believe that Jesus was alive if he saw the wounds...the marks of his death. Thomas wasn’t the cynic, wasn’t the one always plagued with doubts. One writer, Paul Simpson Duke,¹ describes Thomas, as portrayed in the Gospel of John, as “a solid realist, and a brave one at that.” Duke recalls that when Lazarus died and Jesus headed for Judea, which the disciples knew was risky, Thomas declared “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (11:16). And, in his farewell narrative when Jesus tells the disciples not to fear because they know where he is going, Duke says “Thomas is straightforward enough to say that, in fact they do not know (14:5).” Duke continues: “He is by no means a person of unsteady conviction or of a predisposition to doubt, but someone who is willing to face and to name the evident difficult facts.”

¹ “Homiletical Perspective on John 20:24-31,” *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Vol 2, Chapters 10-21*. Westminster, John Knox Press, 2015, 327-331.

Although Thomas had said that he needed to touch the wounds as verification, when Jesus appeared and invited him to do so, and invited him to believe, that was enough. He immediately “utter[ed] the highest confession of faith in the Gospels”: “My Lord and my God!” Thomas was not content to live by the faith and experience of others; he needed his personal experience of the Risen Christ. But by the time this gospel was written, those immediate experiences with the resurrected body of Christ were no longer possible. Thus, the writer records Jesus encouraging people of all generations: “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

We all benefit from and are carried upon the backs of the apostles and the faith of Christians throughout the centuries. Yet, Jesus continues to beckon us, like Thomas, to come to him, to have a personal encounter, and believe. To receive that same breath of Holy Spirit, that gives us peace beyond measure and empowers us for the work of reconciliation.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had that encounter. It was that Spirit breath that allowed him to go from Atlanta to Memphis, 50 years ago this week, for another march in the tension-filled standoff between the city of Memphis and the black sanitation workers, even though he’d been fighting a migraine headache for three days. He hadn’t planned to give a speech that night, but when the call came from the church where people were gathered, that same Spirit empowered him to get out of bed in his Lorraine Hotel room, change from pajamas, and go out into a dark, rainy night. He ended his speech, which would be his last, on the night before he was killed, saying:

Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop.

And I don’t mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

And so I’m happy, tonight.

I’m not worried about anything.

I’m not fearing any man!

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!²

In this Easter season, as we still stumble on in search of the Promised Land, may our fears turn to belief as we hear the Risen Christ speak “Peace!” to each of us, and as we breath in Holy Spirit and go as he sends us to forgive and to reconcile.

² <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>