

“Peace Be With You” – John 20:19-31 – Easter 2

The smell of fear in the room was palpable. Nobody moved; nobody spoke. Through the locked doors they heard the sounds of searchers, muffled voices calling out to each other to ask which rooms had been searched, which ones were empty. Occasionally the latch on the heavy doors would rattle, as someone tried it, hoping to discover those rebels inside. Otherwise the silence was complete as they collectively held their breath, hoping and praying they would not be discovered and that before too long they could slip out of the city to safety.

The grief in the room was as strong as the fear. The silence that helped keep them from being discovered also provided a heavy blanket over their grief, and pain, and sense of overwhelming loss. They had not only lost their beloved Teacher, they had lost faith. All of it had been so magnificent: the walks along sunlit paths, discussing and discovering the story of God’s involvement in the lives of people over all those many centuries; learning of the power of God at work in this incredible man, watching as he healed with a word, with a touch; celebrating with the crowds as word of his mighty deeds and inspired teaching spread throughout the land. Oh it had been a wondrous and a glorious time, but now those times were only memories, and recalling those memories brought into contrast the searing pain, dismay, discouragement, depression, and gloom of this tightly-sealed room. Here in this self-imposed dungeon those memories seemed from a place much further away than just outside the door, and much longer ago than just a few days. This was their new reality: powerless, hunted, and fearing for their very lives.

In that den of depression, they had to admit that it was over. The evidence was too clear, that in spite of all the miracles they had witnessed, even though they had seen with their very eyes how the scriptures had been fulfilled as the eyes of the blind were opened, the legs of the lame danced anew, the lepers shed their rags and their oppression, in spite of all the miraculous deeds, their beloved Teacher had been powerless to save himself, had been executed, and now it was their turn. All that they had believed, all that they had hoped for, all was for nothing now. All that was left was their pain, their grief, their overwhelming sense of loss. All that was left in that room was the smell of fear as they huddled together, quietly and desperately trying to comfort each other.

Their grief and despair was so complete, so thick they could barely see their beloved Teacher as he appeared in their midst. And instead of finding relief as they recognized this man who so recently had been so undeniably dead standing among them their terror became complete. Instead of providing comfort, his unexplainable appearance with them behind locked doors was one more terror piled upon them, fueling their fear, annealing their distrust. What grace and mercy that the first words the risen Jesus spoke to them were words of comfort: “Peace be with you.” As the disciples rejoiced in his presence, Jesus added two more statements, one an instruction, and the other an affirmation of new life.

Sadly these two additional statements have been somewhat lost through the ages, overshadowed both by confusion over the further instruction over forgiving sins but more so by the overwhelming attention paid to Thomas’ huge turnaround from skepticism to full-on faith. It is sad because when we lose sight of these initial verses we also miss that this is the Pentecost event as described by John, a description that is considerably less spectacular (and familiar) to us than Luke’s account. And by skipping over these initial verses we also miss the profound gifts offered by Jesus to his disciples, and to us.

Note that although they were huddled in fear and had lost faith, Jesus did not condemn the terrified disciples. Instead his first words were to comfort, to ease their pain and suffering, to

calm their disturbed souls. “Peace be with you”, Jesus said. He bolstered that comfort, assuring them that his appearance among them was not an illusion, but a comforting reality. Jesus showed them his hands, and his sides, and they were comforted and began to rejoice. There’s a great irony in that it was the signs of his death that were enough to break through to them and convince them he was alive. Signs of death, turned into signs of life. And then Jesus confirmed his being alive by giving them the gift of the very breath of life, the Holy Spirit. No waiting fifty days in this gospel, the Holy Spirit was here given to the disciples even as they began to believe again.

Can you imagine the scene? Can you imagine the giddy excitement of all in that room, grief and terror turned into glad rejoicing by the unbelievable appearance of Jesus, risen from the grave? Can you imagine how they must have sounded like fools, babbling to each other? I wonder if they had the character to apologize to Mary, now that they were behaving the same way that she had? Can’t you just see how they appeared to Thomas, swarming around him, each one a little bit louder and more excited than the other as they try to convince him they had indeed seen Jesus? What chaos! What confusion! Who can blame Thomas for being somewhat skeptical?

And then it was Thomas’ turn. A week later, just when things were settling down, just when the trauma was turning to a memory, just when the disciples were starting to get a grip on life again, once again Jesus stands among them. Again their reaction must have been one of fear, for again he calms them, “peace be with you”. Jesus demonstrated not only that he already knew what Thomas needed, but also that he was (and is) the compassionate Lord, full of understanding and caring. “Put your finger here ... reach out and touch me”, he invites Thomas, who can only respond with all the passion that is in him, “my Lord and my God!” What a powerful, spine-tingling moment it was then, and still is now. Once again the signs of death become the signs of life, and a believer inherits that life.

Again, I feel I must point out how so many people get it wrong here. Significant numbers of Christians, and even some colleagues of mine argue that it’s the strength of one’s faith that is the key to receiving God’s grace. To them, and to you, I point out that Thomas, good old ‘doubting’ Thomas, is the last person to be converted in this gospel – and he was a disciple!! Many find it hard to believe, and yet it is precisely to those whose faith is imperfect, to people who have real doubts, that Jesus comes and says, “Peace be with you.” It is to the distressed, to those who want to believe but can’t, that Jesus comes and says, “look, see, touch, believe.” It is hard to believe that we are part of the world that God so loves that His Son came to offer life, and life abundant, but we are, and the proof is right here.

I think many of us slip into thinking this is the end of the story – Thomas is convinced, Thomas believes in Jesus, badda-bing-badda-boom, the end. Even the closing two verses of the chapter provide a wrap-up in what sounds a lot like a final footnote, that even the NRSV titles with a concluding “The Purpose of This Book”. True, there is another chapter that follows, with accounts of more appearances of Jesus to his disciples, but there is a certain finality to the verse “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.”

What we have is not an ending, but a beginning. This is the most pivotal moment and point of the whole Christ story. This is the moment when the disciples are transformed into the apostles (literally, “sent back” or “sent against” or “sent out”). This is that moment when they had to start to come to terms with the fact that their belief in Jesus was not just a “Hosanna” kind of joy ride but that they had committed their entire life to him. Thomas may well have been the

first to see clearly the depth of and the significance of what believing in the resurrection of Jesus might entail, namely a life-giving and life-long commitment.

In our 21st Century, highly-independent mindset that sounds a bit like a life sentence in prison, doesn't it – committing one's whole life entirely to Jesus. But these encounters with the risen Christ were for the disciples, and for us, not the end of the story but just the momentous beginning of a life-long story. "That you may believe ... and – more importantly – that you may have life". That is not a summary of what had happened, it is a statement of purpose of what will happen.

It is clear that the gift of peace and new life that Jesus brought to his disciples – and still brings to us today – had meaning and purpose. Jesus also told them, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you." The purpose of the peace Jesus brings is not merely to calm us while we huddle together; that peace is intended to strengthen us, to invigorate us, to provide a foundation for us as we also are sent. Being sent is what our faith in and our response to Jesus is all about, and fear is often the great hindrance that keeps us from boldly stepping out in faith. Fear of change, fear of irrelevance, fear of failure all tend to hold us prisoners, trapped in our own upper rooms. But it is precisely here, where we are trapped by our fears, that Jesus still comes, saying "Peace be with you" and breathing new life into us by his Holy Spirit and telling us to get on with being sent forth.

Is that frightening? Certainly! It's hard to believe that we're up to such a challenge, to wonder if our faith is strong enough, whether it's worth it to believe. Starts to sound a bit like Thomas, doesn't it? But that's OK, because the answer was there, provided for Thomas by the risen Christ, demonstrating with his hands and his side that He was willing to lead by example those who would follow, and by his resurrection that He had the power to give the life He promised those who would follow. That same answer is there for us as well, still provided by the risen Christ, still with the promise that those who can, and will, and do say, "I believe", will indeed find peace in this new, rich, rewarding, fulfilling life.