

St. Paul's Congregational Church
April 8, 2018, John 20:19-31
Peace Be With You – Easter 2
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Try to imagine what life was like for those first disciples that first week after Jesus died. How did they feel? What did they do? Maybe we all can think back to a time in our own lives when that first week after a death in our family was a blur – the necessities of daily living went on – but perhaps we moved in slow motion, full of emotion over our loss, doing what needs to be done but not really with it.

I remember feeling overwhelmed – we can't get our head, our arms around this new reality, we can't figure it out, we can't organize it or bring it under control. We are overwhelmed in a way that makes us feel small, weak, inadequate.

Overwhelmed, then, is a good way to describe the disciples after Jesus died, huddled together in their fear and confusion, not knowing where to turn or what to do next. Their leader, their teacher, who had held them together all those long months was dead and buried, executed like a common criminal, lying in a tomb or so they thought. Such a disappointing turn of events! When Jesus went into that tomb, their hope, their vision, their sense of direction and purpose in life went with him. They were left only with an overwhelming sense of failure, loss, and shame – because they knew they had deserted Jesus in his hour of need.

Then one of the women, Mary Magdalene, was saying things that didn't make sense – that she had actually seen Jesus and had talked with him, that Jesus was alive - that he had risen from the dead just as he had promised. They didn't believe Mary's words, though – so the men didn't open up the doors and rush back to the tomb. They stayed put and waited to see what would happen next.

We might find it ironic that Jesus, who had been sealed in a tomb is free, and the disciples, who ran for their lives, are in lockdown, barricaded behind closed doors. But suddenly, astonishingly, quietly, there he was, right there in their midst, before their very eyes. Jesus was alive!

Isn't it reasonable to assume that the disciples might have been just a little bit afraid that this was not all good news? That Jesus might be

understandably angry with them for abandoning him, in Peter's case for even denying Jesus three times, while his Lord and Savior was questioned by the religious authorities? It's frightening enough to see someone who was dead suddenly alive, but what if he had every reason to say, "Where were you when I needed you? What kind of faithful disciples are you, anyway? Why did you run out on me? Peter, you especially, I picked you out to be the leader; how could you have denied me three times?"

But that's not what happened. There were no recriminations, no anger, no condemnation or judgment, not even an understandable expression, or "venting," of disappointment and hurt. Instead, the first words Jesus offered were both greeting and gift: "Peace be with you." He knew what was in their hearts and why they had barred the door. He saw right through them and knew that they weren't re-grouping, getting it together and deciding on their next move, that is, how they were going to carry on Jesus' legacy or spread his teaching. They were scared and hiding out.

Yet suddenly, in the midst of their fear and confusion, there he was, not with angels, trumpets, or legions, but quietly. He brought only peace, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and a commission. In fact, he breathed the Spirit into them. This is John's "Pentecost," although the Spirit comes here not with wind and flame but with Jesus' own breath, the very life-force of the one raised from the dead who tells them to go out and be peace and forgiveness and love for the world.

At creation, God breathed life into us humans, a tender, intimate, up-close and personal moment, and here we are again, with Jesus not holding his disciples at arm's length but re-creating this sorry crew of weak disciples, giving them the gift of new life, the gift of grace, and commissioning them to share that gift, that good news, with the world. However, he does not give them the gift of a personal, "private" faith, a just-you-and-me-Jesus faith that has nothing to do with the world that God loves so well. Instead, these weak and overwhelmed disciples, now Spirit-gifted, are Jesus' gift to the world. If they respond to the gift of grace with love, that love will be the gift they take out into the world.

And friends, we have received that same gift – the gift of peace, the gift of new life, the gift of grace, and we too are commissioned to share those gifts with the world. What do you believe we – individually, and as St. Paul's Congregational Church, are sent to do and be in the world?

And what does that gift of peace look like? The "peace" brought by Jesus is a challenge as well as a gift: it can come with a price: Kristin Johnston Largen describes the gift Jesus brings to the frightened disciples and to all of us today: it's the peace "that brings back into the fold the

outcast and the marginalized, and turns upside down the societal conventions of first and last, blessed and cursed, rich and poor. Jesus' peace invites the lion to see the lamb as neighbor and friend, the Jew to speak with the Samaritan and the prostitute to dine with the Pharisee." Largen cautions, however, "that the Christian ideals of inclusion, love and justice are, ironically, met in every age with "rejection and harassment." A threat to the powers that be in one age is a threat to them in every age. What if the way we witness and work and live, as disciples gathered together here at St. Paul's and scattered in the world, actually seeks to embody the kind of peace Jesus brought to those frightened, overwhelmed disciples? Are we willing to take on this challenge, regardless of the cost?

Now, we continue the story in today's text – we don't know why Thomas wasn't with them that night when Jesus suddenly appeared to the disciples. All John tells us is that when they told Thomas of the experience, he didn't believe them. Again, he expresses the shock, the surprise, the others have felt. I'm sure he wanted to have the same experience himself, with the same assurance the others had felt. Then 8 days later, Thomas is there with the others when Jesus appears again. Same greeting – peace be with you. But Jesus tells Thomas to look at his wounds, to touch his wounds. Thomas' response? The doubter immediately makes the most complete, most profound affirmation of Christ's nature of anyone in the gospel: My Lord and My God!

It's important to remember that the story of Thomas is a message for the people in John's community a generation or two later when the Gospel was being written down. Their faith was based not on what they had seen with their own eyes but on what they heard. Jesus is really talking to them (and to us) when he says to Thomas the words that Eugene Peterson translates in *The Message* as, "Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing." Even better blessings. That is the promise to the church one week after our beautiful Easter services, but it's not back to life as usual.

Back to our lives with our own "overwhelmings": wars and uprisings, terror attacks, shootings, an environmental crisis that looms ominously over us and our grandchildren, - wildfires and floods, the poisoning of our water systems, the melting of glaciers and flooding of coastlines, superstorms and natural disasters - nagging economic injustice with huge gaps in wealth in spite of the "recovery," and political divisions poisoned by ugly rhetoric and stubbornness on all sides.

And then there are our own individual griefs and burdens: health problems, kid problems, too much work, too much worry, too much coming

at us, so much to run away from, so much to fear. And our concerns for our church community continue - what's an overwhelmed person of faith to do?

One week after the music and the splendor of the flowers have faded, how are we to live "as Easter people"? Do we believe what we have heard? The great preacher William Sloane Coffin once said, "As I see it, the primary religious task these days is to try to think straight. You can't think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. If your heart's a stone, you can't have decent thoughts--either about personal relations or about international ones. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind."

When our hearts fill with a fear that overwhelms us, a fear that makes us feel weak and small and inadequate, all of us disciples receive that same gift of grace, forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit, a gift that limbers up our minds and our hearts, turning them from hearts of stone to hearts full of love.

Jesus sends us out into the world, to put our hands on the marks of its suffering, to bring good news and hope to all of God's children. Isn't that the mission of this church: to love the world, as Parker Palmer says, "not to enlarge our membership, not to bring outsiders to accept our terms, but simply to love the world in every possible way--to love the world as God did and does"? Why, then, do so many people perceive the church as judgmental rather than loving? We may feel overwhelmed on this the Second Sunday of Easter, like those disciples one week later, even though we have experienced the risen Jesus. We may feel like locking our doors and hiding out. Indeed, it's a great temptation in the life of the church to huddle behind massive, beautiful doors, to hide out from a world in pain and great need, and to make our faith a personal, private thing that has nothing to do with that pain or that need. But, that's not our call is it. We are called to see with our hearts. We are called to throw open the doors. We are sent out!

Frederick Buechner has written a beautiful sermon, "The Seeing Heart," on this text. We've all heard Thomas called "the Doubter," but Buechner focuses on his other name, "the Twin." He confesses that he himself is "the other twin," and reflects on the gift of believing more than what our eyes take in: "Our eyes tell us that the small country church down the road needs a new coat of paint and that the lady who plays the organ looks a little like W.C. Fields and that the pews are rarely more than a quarter filled on any given Sunday."

Our eyes see "facts" while our hearts see "truth," for example, the true "holiness" of that little church, despite outward appearances. (We might also say the vitality of that church, for many of our smallest churches are full of

life.) Buechner also suggests that, for Thomas, perhaps it was the first time that he saw not just "the fact of Jesus," but "the truth of Jesus and the truth of who Jesus was for him."

Maybe we've had a similar experience of "seeing" Jesus, of being quiet long enough to feel his presence "in the silence of waiting and listening." What a challenge for a church that is often more grounded in spoken words than in the Word! Here Buechner eloquently ties the experience of seeing Jesus "with our hearts" to the commission that we, along with the disciples that morning long ago, have received from Jesus, every time he comes to us, when we accept his invitation to a whole new way of living, "the only life worth living....To see him with the heart is to take heart, to grow true hearts, brave hearts, at last."

Whatever overwhelms us, God comes to us in the midst of our fear and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever doubts churn in our minds, whatever sins trouble our consciences, whatever pain and worry bind us up, whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely, God comes to us and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever hunger and need we feel deep in our souls, God calls us to the table, feeds us well, and sends us out into the world to be justice and peace, salt and light, hope for the world. We can do it, if we keep our eyes open, our minds, as William Sloane Coffin would say, "limber," and our hearts soft and willing to love. As God sent Jesus, God sends us, too, into the world that God loves.

Jesus shows us the way. The Holy Spirit is breathed on us too. We have the possibility for new life. We have the power to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven. Through our doubts – through our fears – do we recognize it? No, let us not stop doubting. But let us speak of the doubt of wonder, the doubt of openness, of searching, of action. The doubt that when shared can lead to a deeper faith and allow us to say with Thomas, without hesitation, but firmly, joyfully, awe-filled – My Lord and My God! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed!

Friends, that's the good news of Easter. Let us rejoice and be glad and go and tell, let us show and live the love that God has given, is giving, and will always give to us. Amen!