

Scripture: John 20:19-31

*“When it was evening on that day”* is how our reading from John 20 begins. It is evening on the first Easter Sunday, and the disciples are hiding in a locked room for fear of the authorities. They are fearful about what they should do next, where should they go, how should they live. They had put all they had into following Jesus, and now they are afraid that it was all for nothing.

Imagine for a moment being there with them. Things had not gone as the disciples had hoped. Even though Jesus had talked about his death, they were sure that once in Jerusalem he would use his power to subdue the city. Instead, his powerful speeches and stories had only made the leaders of Jerusalem angry, angry enough to convict him, and ultimately crucify him. As Jesus had been apprehended and executed, the disciples knew that they might be as well.

Then there was that emotional Thursday evening, when Jesus washed their feet, and shared a last supper with them. Later there was his agony in the garden, when those same disciples fell asleep as Jesus prayed. There was the betrayal by one of their own, Judas, and Jesus’ arrest. And three times Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. Imagine the guilt and lack of peace in their hearts, knowing how they had failed Jesus.

Disheartened, defensive, guilt-ridden, angry, ashamed – a few of the words that spring to mind. You and I can understand these feelings. Yes, the stories we read in the gospels are our stories.

It is to these frightened disciples that the Risen Christ appears and greets them with the words, *“Peace be with you.”* To ease their doubts, he shows them his nail-scarred hands and pierced side.

The disciples rejoice! The Risen Christ does not rebuke them. He does not ask, “Why did you abandon me?” He does not condemn them for being locked up in fear. He does not chastise them for not believing Mary’s testimony. Rather, Jesus stands among them, and simply says, Peace. The words that he had spoken to them in that upper room a few days earlier ring in their ears: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled; and do not let them be afraid...”*

Again the Risen Christ says, *“Peace be with you.”* This time the greeting is a prelude to commissioning, *“As God (the Father) has sent me, so I send you.”* He does to them what he had done with Mary Magdalene earlier in the day. The disciples are now sent to continue Jesus’ mission of revealing God to the world.

But Jesus does not just tell the disciples to do this. He equips them to do this daunting task. Jesus had promised to send another Advocate who

would be with them forever (14:16-17). Now he fulfills that promise. In an act of new creation, he breathes the gift of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, and with that breath comes the commissioning to carry his message. This Advocate or “Spirit of truth” will teach them, remind them of all that Jesus has said to them, and guide them into all truth.

And having received the new life of the Spirit, the disciples are commissioned to be agents of extending that new life to others in the task of forgiving. Jesus breathes forgiveness, and in receiving this forgiving power, the disciples are sent out to do the same, to forgive others as they have been forgiven.

Peace and forgiveness; these are the hallmarks of the new life in Christ. For Jesus, true peace begins with forgiveness. We might call God’s forgiveness our commissioning. True forgiveness begins the process toward true peace. The disciples are to be forgiven-people-of-peace out in the world, who forgive others out of love and for peace.

Friends, forgiveness is a complicated topic and practice, one in which we should be careful to avoid oversimplification. It is important to acknowledge that forgiveness is a very different activity from justice, reparation, or reconciliation. Often these all get jumbled together – a mixing that leads to none of them being adequately pursued – and usually more than one of these facets need to be pursued alongside forgiveness. But forgiveness is something we can pursue on our own, even when the other party refuses to engage in the works of peace. Forgiveness is an act of peace we can give to others, but it is also an act that we can take for ourselves. Just like the disciples locked away in the upper room, by the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, we can know Jesus’ peace and forgiveness in the midst of complicated feelings and be people of grace.

*“Peace be with you,”* the Risen Christ says. God’s peace is for everyone, for every circumstance. It is for everyone who has betrayed, abandoned, or denied a relationship. God’s peace is for everyone who is weighed down by guilt, in whatever form it takes. God’s peace is for people like Thomas who initially rejects and refuses the peace which is offered. It is a peace that enters in, even to our darkest times and places and shows us the love that is beyond all measure. It is the peace that says, I have you, and I am not letting you go. *“My peace, my presence, I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”*

From the place of death, Jesus comes to each of us with the gift of life. From the place of anguish and fear, Jesus comes with the gift of comfort and peace. The Risen Christ reminds the disciples to breathe, and when they breathe, peace comes.

One of our most beautiful hymns begins, “Breathe on me, breath of God, Fill me with life anew, That I may love what thou dost love And do what thou wouldst do.”

For many this hymn has become a prayer: to be filled with the breath of God. “Breathe on me, breath of God, Until my heart is pure. Until with thee I will one will, To do and to endure.”

As we celebrate and journey together in this Easter season, we do so with the privilege and responsibility of being the church in the world: being the place where those who come seeking the Risen Christ, doubts and all, find the breath of new life and the forgiveness that God offers all creation.

“Breathe on me, breath of God, So shall I never die But live with thee the perfect life Of thine eternity.”

Thanks be to God. Amen