

As The Father Sent Me, So I Send You

John 20:19-31

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The 2nd Sunday of Easter

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week...”

These words take us back to the first Easter Sunday, the day when the women discovered that Jesus’ tomb was empty. In Mark’s account, the women fled in terror and amazement, and said nothing to anyone (Mark 16:8). In John’s version, Mary Magdalene did inform Peter and the beloved disciple, who checked out her story and found it to be true. Not knowing what to make of the empty tomb, they went back home. Later that morning, Mary returned to tell the disciples “I have seen the Lord” (John 18:1-18).



We meet them on the evening of that same day, gathered together in the house. But they are not rejoicing. They are not celebrating Christ’s resurrection. Instead they are huddled together behind locked doors for fear of the Judean authorities. Afraid of what those authorities might have in store for Jesus’ followers. And maybe, just maybe they are also afraid of meeting Jesus, risen from the dead to confront them with their failures. Their lack of trust and confidence his words about being crucified and raised again. Their desertion and abandonment of him

when he was arrested. Peter’s public denial, not once but three times.¹

But notice what happens when the risen Christ does encounter them. Does he say a single word about their failure to believe, to understand, to follow through, to be loyal and true to him? No, Jesus does not utter a single word of blame or accusation. Instead Jesus greets them with a blessing, “Peace be with you.” A blessing that he repeats once he has convinced them that he is no avenging ghost, but the flesh-and-blood crucified Jesus. “Peace be with you. I was dead, and see, I am alive (Revelation 1:18). Let your hearts not be troubled. Be not afraid. I bring you peace, a peace that is not just freedom from anxiety and dread, but a deep serene wholeness and well-being.”

¹ Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on John 20:19-31,” available at http://workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1991.

Jesus blesses his disciples, tells them “As the Father sent me, so I send you,” and breathes the Holy Spirit on them, commissioning them to continue his mission of revealing God’s love and salvation to the world. The scene closes with Jesus statement, “If you would release the sins of any, they are released; if you would retain, they are retained.” Note that this is not a command, but a kind of a heads-up, pay attention warning to the disciples: “if you do this, then this happens, if you do that, that happens.”² So let’s be very clear, Jesus did not command his disciples then, or now, to go out into the world to release and retain sins. He did not give them, or us, some special power to decide which sins will be forgiven and which will not. He did not give us the authority to decide whose sins will be forgiven and whose will not.³

Jesus is not primarily interested in those things we call “sins” — our mistakes and wrongdoing, our moral failure and lack of perfection. Those things are after all only symptoms of the sin that is at the root of all our sins: our estrangement from God, our inability and unwillingness to believe and trust in God’s love for us. How the disciples of Jesus, then and now, tell the story of Jesus and live it out in their daily lives, will either lead people believe and trust in God, or drive them deeper into fear and distrust.

And then a week later, Jesus comes back because once again the disciples have gathered behind shut doors. Jesus comes back so that Thomas can see and touch his resurrected body. Jesus comes back to receive Thomas’ confession of trust and relationship: “*my* Lord and *my* God.” Jesus comes back because Thomas was not the only one still needing reassurance of the resurrection. Jesus comes back and speaks a word of blessing for all who will come to believe and trust in him even though they might never see his flesh-and-blood-crucified-and-risen body.

As the Father sent me, so I send you. God sent Jesus to show us how much God loves the world (John 3:16), all of it — mineral, vegetable, animal, and human. God did not send Jesus to condemn or judge us (John 3:17), because judgment does not have the power to heal and transform what is broken. All judgment does is frighten and inhibit us. Only love has the power to transform our lives. Giving and receiving love is what changes our hearts and heals our brokenness.⁴ We see this acted out in this text. The disciples have accepted the judgment of the authorities that they are criminals, and they have judged themselves to be failures for abandoning Jesus. In their fear they go into hiding, seeking security behind locked doors. Those locked doors are no obstacle for the risen Christ who comes not to judge and condemn, but to bring his terrified disciples the blessing of peace. Jesus utters words of grace and mercy, showing them what love looks like in real life. Then he sends the disciples to go and do the same. Their fear, doubt, pain, and confusion had not easily overcome and so he comes back again a week later.

² D. Mark Davis, “Releasing and Retaining Brokenness,” available at <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/04/releasing-and-retaining-brokenness.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ J. Philip Newell, *Christ of the Celts — The Healing of Creation* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), p. 85.

All of us are exactly like those disciples, cowering in fear behind locked doors, expecting to be exposed, judged and condemned as the failures that we know or think we know ourselves to be. The good news is that Christ does not expose, judge or condemn us. Christ will never label us as the world does because God does not give two hoots about our race, color, size, gender, sexual orientation, age, political inclination, the size of our bank accounts, our grade point average, or any of those things. All that Christ sees in each of us is a beloved child of God, created in the image of God, and for whom he died. Christ's resurrection means that God's love for you and me is stronger than death, stronger than any of our failings, stronger than any of the labels others try to attach to us. To each of us the risen Christ has one word, and only one word: the blessing of peace, the assurance of grace, mercy, and a love that we cannot kill no matter how hard we try.

Jesus gives each one of us the gift of his Spirit, empowering us to make a positive difference in the lives of the scared and frightened people we meet in our daily lives, in our homes, our schools, our workplaces and our neighborhoods. We are surrounded by people who desperately need to hear the good news of Christ's undying love. Let me share with you one real life example:

As I was unloading supplies for the Seder meal, a neighbor lady apologetically asked if I minded her kids riding their bikes on the sidewalk in front of the church. I replied that they are always welcome to play around the church where it is safe, and then invited her to bring the children to our Easter egg hunt, and maybe even to church and Sunday school. She said she was uncomfortable coming to church because she was sure we could hear her yelling at the kids all the time. I assured her that I've never heard her yell at the kids, and even if I did it wouldn't matter at all. I raised three kids and guess what, there were times I yelled at them. So.... here we have a neighbor who stays away from church out of fear of being judged as an inadequate parent by the disciples of Jesus who gather in this place.

I can only wonder what fears keep the other neighbors away. I wonder how we can reach out to them, what we might say or do to show them Christ's love.

Please pray with me:

Dearest Jesus, thank you for showing up here week after week in word, water, bread and wine. Open our hearts to receive, accept and trust you as our Lord and our God. Help us know, live and share your love with all whom we meet in the coming week. Amen.