

Easter 2 (A)
April 19, 2020
Text: John 20:19-31

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There are two sides to our gospel story for today, about the risen Jesus appearing to his startled disciples in a locked upper room. There's the before side, and there's the after side. Before the disciples saw their risen Lord, there was fear. They were afraid of the authorities, afraid the soldiers would be coming for them next. The text says the doors were locked, and I can imagine that if there were blinds on the windows, they were pulled down as well. The disciples were devastated by Jesus' death, and they were anxious and afraid about their own situation. That was the before side—before the risen Jesus appeared.

And then there was after. Jesus gave them his peace. He showed them the wounds in his hands and his side, and showed them that not even his death and burial were obstacles for God's power of new life. Even for Thomas, who was absent when Jesus appeared on that first Sunday evening; even for Thomas there was proof of God's power for life. After, there was awe and wonder, and peace, and joy. After, there was a community defined by love and forgiveness. After, there was boldness and confidence, and an unshakable conviction that God's love was stronger than death, stronger than human failure and sin. Instead of being constrained by fear, the disciples were moved by love. That was the after side—after the risen Jesus appeared.

It seems to me that we can probably identify with both the before and the after. Yes, we live after that bright, glad Easter morning when God broke open the tomb and broke the power of death to hold Jesus down. Yes, we know the joy of Easter, the wonder and peace. We know the hope of Easter, that because Jesus lives, we will live too. But we also know what it's like to live in a fearful time. We're still hunkered down, still doing our social distancing, and it seems like we still will for several more weeks while we wait for the virus to retreat. We know what it's like to live with uncertainty, with anxiety and fear due to the global economic slowdown. We're especially concerned about the economic impact on Oregon, on Portland, on our jobs, our paychecks.

We're acquainted with both the before and the after. And I wonder whether the invitation from our gospel story today is to discover how to live more in the after than we do in the before, how to abide in a place of courage and love rather than be driven by fear and worry. For me, the key in the story is recognizing that it's all about the presence of the risen Christ. This isn't about my capacity to create happy thoughts for myself or to feel optimistic. The disciples in our gospel story certainly weren't thinking happy thoughts. For them, everything was as bleak as could be until the risen Christ broke through to them behind their locked doors, hunkered down and hiding away. It was when the risen Christ appeared that everything changed for them. And the life of faith, for us too, is all about Christ's power to meet us in the scary times and sad times with his power for life and peace.

I wonder, then, about the ways you experience Christ's presence and power to break through to you when your world starts to feel small and anxious or depressed. There are so many

different ways of experiencing Christ as the life-giving presence of God—through prayer or meditation, through reflecting on scripture, through sharing the meal of Holy Communion and living together as the community that follows Jesus' way of compassion and inclusion. Our gospel story for today, though, offers us one of the more challenging ways of experiencing Jesus present—through practicing forgiveness. Notice, though, how Jesus gives this practice to his follows—and by extension, to us.

First, then, Jesus forgives his disciples. Remember, they were the ones who abandoned him in his time of need. So Jesus says to them, "Peace be with you." There is no retribution or retaliation. No judgment or condemnation. Instead, peace be with you. As the one who had been wronged, as the one we might imagine having the right to pay it all back, Jesus makes it clear that retaliation ends with him. Judgment and condemnation end with him. Instead, there is only "Peace be with you." And for us too, no matter what life history we bring with us, no matter what mistakes or colossal screw ups we have managed, no matter the hurt we have caused, Jesus does not meet us with judgment, but with forgiveness. "Peace be with you."

And then Jesus empowers the disciples with the Holy Spirit, because the practice of forgiveness doesn't seem to be something that comes naturally to the human family. So Jesus breathes on them—although a better translation would be "breathes into them"—and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is John's way of picturing the meaning of Pentecost—God's gift of the Spirit to empower God's people—and John wants us to hear it as an echo of how, in the creation story from Genesis 2, God breathed the breath of life into us to make us living beings. What Jesus is doing is nothing less than creating a new human family, one that will live in peace and love, not with hate and violence. That's what it means to be the church, to be the community of Jesus. God is making a new start, a fresh beginning, for all of us. You are part of the body in which Jesus is alive, making that new beginning. You are part of that gift of new life for the world. And how will this new life be shared? With forgiveness. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them."

People of God, practicing Jesus' way of forgiveness is one of the ways we experience more of the joy after the resurrection, and less of the fear and anxiety from before the resurrection. It doesn't mean we become immune to the sadness or worry of life. I'm sure that all of our homes are showing some signs of the stress of this time. Instead, as Jesus breathes his Spirit into us and inspires us to live his way of love—of which forgiveness is one very powerful expression—we find that the sadness and worry are less able to define us. Forgiveness means freedom for us. It means we are set free from the grip of the past, free to not be constrained by anything that happened in the past, whether it was something we did, or something that was done to us. Forgiveness sets us free to choose our own way, a way shaped by love. Forgiveness is certainly a life-long journey and a life-long learning process, and we are sharing it together—with the risen Christ among us. It's a journey into more of the peace and joy and hope after the resurrection, and less of the fear and sadness and worry from before. Thanks be to God. Amen.