

Easter 2 April 3, 2016 John 20:19-31 "God's Peace - Already Here!"

Every year we hear the story of the continued failure of Jesus' disciples. Those of us who went through Holy Week know all too well how they let Jesus down by caring more about their own safety than their loyalty to Jesus. We know how Peter denied - cursing as he did so - even knowing Jesus. He claimed not to even know the guy!

A week after Jesus' resurrection from the dead was shared with the disciples, where were they? Not out spreading the good news that the Lord had beaten even death, but instead holed up behind locked doors, full of fear instead of faith. Peter who had been called "the Rock" upon which Jesus would build his church was "rocky" instead. Those disciples Jesus had said would do greater works than he himself had done were doing no works at all.

If things had continued the way they were going that first week after Easter, there would be no church today, for it would have turned to dust there in that closed-up, frightened room.

God, though, had something else in mind. Without knocking or walking through a door, Jesus appeared to those uncertain followers and offered them peace.

Peace. It's more than just a cease-fire, better than just no conflict. Peace is shalom, wholeness of one's soul. Peace with Jesus that day meant restored relationship where it had been broken.

It's likely that most of us have had times in our lives when we felt anything but peaceful. Job stresses, money problems, broken relationships, concern about one's son or daughter, or - another biggie - health challenges. Lack of peace feels like somebody's using a cheese grater in your chest, the tension builds, and an exhausting anxiety can become the day's regular fare.

Peace, on the other hand, is often hard for us to even imagine. A toddler sleeping can be one picture of peace, so carefree, trusting, untroubled. Or a beloved cat with a full stomach stretched out. Or an elderly person who has lived life well and found deep satisfaction. Peace. We all yearn for peace. Peace is what Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, offers.

The Easter season, and especially today's scripture about how Thomas at first missed Jesus' visit and could not believe without seeing, is about what *God* did and continues to do, and how hard it is for us to receive what Jesus can give us. If you feel left out, he came back that second time for you. If you don't think you have much to offer in the way of your faith, if you're pretty anxious about life and your part in it, Jesus came back for you. For us. Easter is not about how good we are or how faithful a church we are; it is about what God can do with people who feel like failures. The good news is this: The risen Christ can enter the fearful chambers of every church and every Christian and fill the place with his own life!

Jesus did not enter and start chastising his disciples: "Why couldn't you stay with me? Why did you let me down? I guess I'll have to find better followers!" Instead, he offered peace. He showed them his hands and his side and said again, "Peace be with you"; and he told them

that he had work for them to do in the world, just as he, Jesus, had been sent. He breathed on them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and he commissioned them to perform binding acts of forgiveness.

Theologian Karl Barth suggested that to say the old line from the creed, "I believe in the Holy catholic church" does not mean that we believe in the church. It means rather to believe that God is present and at work in the church, that 'in this assembly, the work of the Holy Spirit takes place. ... We do not believe in the Church: but we do believe that in this congregation the work of the Holy Spirit becomes an event.' (Karl Barth, *Dogmatics In Outline* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), pp. 142-143.)

Presbyterian preacher, professor and writer Thomas Long told of a time when Barth's words rang particularly true for him. Years ago he was invited by a congregation in a nearby town to be the worship leader for a special evening communion service. In Long's words, "The church staff had planned the service to be educational as well as worshipful. The idea was that, first, the congregation would gather in the sanctuary and I would give a brief talk about the meanings of the Lord's Supper. Then, everybody would go into the fellowship hall and be seated around tables for the service itself.

"At each table there would be the flour and other ingredients to form the dough for the communion loaves. The plan called for each table to prepare a loaf and, while the loaves baked in the ovens of the church kitchen, the people at each table were to engage in various exercises designed to get them talking about their experiences in the faith.

"It was a good idea, but like many well-planned events, things looked better on the drawing board than they turned out in reality. There were problems. Children at many tables began to play in the baking ingredients, and white clouds of flour floated around the room coating everybody and everything. There were delays in the kitchen, and the communion bread baked with agonizing slowness. Some of the tables ran out of things to say; children grew weary and fussy; the room was filled with commotion and restlessness. The planners had dreamed of an event of excitement, innovation, peak learning, and moving worship. What happened was noise, exhaustion, and people making the best of a difficult situation. In other words, despite the rosy plans, it was the real church worshiping down there in the church basement."

Finally, the service ended, and, hugely relieved, Rev. Long was able to pronounce the benediction. "The peace of Christ be with you all," he said. Just as he did, a child's voice from somewhere in the room called out strong and true, "It already is."

In Long's words: "Just that -- 'It already is' -- but with those words the service was transformed into an event of joy and holy mystery. That small voice captured what the Gospel of John is trying to say. In the midst of a church that can claim nothing for itself, a church of noise, confusion, weariness, and even fear, the risen Christ comes to give peace. The peace of Christ be with you? Because the risen Christ comes to inhabit our empty places, then, as the child said, 'It already is,' and the church with nothing becomes the church with everything." *Whispering The Lyrics*, Thomas G. Long, CSS Publishing, 1995, 0-7880-0492-1

The Risen Christ is with us. No matter what is preached or sung, regardless how well or poorly we have our act together as a church, whether we have ten or a hundred persons in our sanctuary, God has already acted to give us life and peace. Easter “already is.” Because Jesus Christ is with us and calls us now, we are a church, a people, that has work to do and grace to receive. May Jesus’ peace and challenge find room in our hearts and expression in our lives. Amen.