

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

In our gospel story today, we hear about both the good news, and the challenges that we all face. The good news is the peace that God brings into our lives when we most want to hear it. “Peace be with you” are the first words that the risen Lord says when he comes among the fearful disciples who had locked themselves into that upper room. The challenges are the doubts and fears we all experience.

This week’s story begins in the evening on “that” day. “That day” is the same day that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. In the previous passage, John 20 verse 11, we read about Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and Mary’s joyful words to the disciples “I have seen the Lord.” It’s curious then, that, in the evening of that same day, when the disciples are gathered, some commentators have said that the disciples were down in mood, and feeling guilty. The text says that the doors were locked “for fear of the Jews.” That seems wise, given that “The Jews,” meaning the Jewish hierarchy, had caused the death of Jesus. Certainly, it seems likely that the disciples were deciding what to do next, in view of the hostilities. But Mary had told them that she has seen the Lord, and now, as Jesus passes into a room with locked doors, almost all of them see the Lord with their own eyes.

This Sunday, the Sunday after Easter Day, is traditionally called ‘Low Sunday.’ It’s supposed to be a day that reflects a somewhat less intense celebration after all the excitement of the Day of Resurrection. But in fact, our gospel reading from John describes the reading as being the same day as the resurrected Christ first appears to Mary. What a shock for the disciples to see and experience Jesus themselves. Someone who has come to them in bodily form, passing through locked doors. And it demonstrates the power of the risen Christ, who cannot be contained by a rock tomb or a locked door.

Jesus speaks to the disciples several times in this encounter, and each time his words give them the power and momentum to move forward with task they need to accomplish. That is, spreading the Good News to all who will listen.

First Jesus says, “Peace be to you” (v. 19). Then he shows the disciples his hands and his side. This confirms his bodily resurrection, even though it seemed he had assumed another form, when he had entered through a wall. Also, this refutes the claims of the heretic groups, the Docetists and Gnostics, who both believed that physical matter was evil and that therefore Jesus could not have been truly human.

Again, Jesus says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathes on them or breathes into them more accurately from the Greek. Then he says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Just as God had breathed the breath of life into mankind in Genesis, so Jesus gives the disciples a new life. Then Jesus makes a puzzling statement, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” It reminds us of Matthew 16:19 where Jesus tells Peter, “whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven; and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.”

Rabbis have the authority to “forgive” and “retain” sins in the sense that they interpret the law to determine what is, and is not allowed, but they do not forgive sins. Jesus breaks new ground here by giving the disciples authority to forgive sins or to withhold forgiveness. In this Gospel, sin is a failure to see the truth—a refusal to accept the risen Christ.

After this interaction with Jesus, we read about the disciples eight days later, again in the upper room. On the first occasion, the disciple Thomas was not with them, but they have told him about their meeting, and about

seeing the risen Christ in bodily form. He does not believe though – he wants to see Jesus with his own eyes. “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe,” he says. There have been many pictures painted about doubting Thomas meeting Jesus, as Jesus says to him, “Reach here your finger, and see my hands. Reach here your hand, and put it into my side. Don’t be unbelieving, but believing” (v. 27). We sometimes use the phrase ‘seeing is believing’ and of course this is where it originated.

Thomas now answers Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" and Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Our reading today from the Book of Acts shows us that the disciples had now found the faith and courage. Not only to leave a locked room for fear of the Jews, but they had confronted their fears and gone out to teach. As expected, they were questioned by the Jewish Council and admonished. Peter and the other disciples bravely said to them, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." Then they use this as a teaching moment by saying, "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, ...God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

This story is really about all of us: trying to live a life worthy of our Lord and Savior; struggling with doubt, weighed down with fear, and constantly falling short of what we know that he expects from us. Wanting courage, to be and do all, with the life that has been given us.

And this story is also about how Jesus comes to us, in the midst of our doubts and fears and sin and guilt, to offer each one of us that simple word of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. “*Peace be with you,*” says our risen Lord to us all. This gospel reading is really about the peace which surpasses all understanding; the peace which the world cannot give; the peace that can only come from our crucified and risen Lord; and the peace that comes when we most need it.

AMEN