

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

Just last week, from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday, we remembered the trial, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The disciples were distraught at Jesus’ death on the cross, then amazed when Jesus appeared to the two Marys in the garden. Following the crucifixion the disciples had scattered and fled, fearing for their lives.

The disciples were maybe afraid of seeing Jesus again. After all, they had failed him miserably. Peter had denied him three times, and the rest had deserted him, except for “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” who had been at the cross and had taken Jesus’ mother into his home. Perhaps the last person the disciples wanted to meet on that evening in today’s gospel reading, was Jesus, risen from the dead, to confront them with their failures.

Now, on the first day of the week after the Sabbath Passover, most of the disciples were meeting for the first time after that catastrophic event. The gospel says, “<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’” He comes right through those locked doors and appears in the midst of his frightened sheep. He comes not to confront his disciples with their failures, but to grant them peace.

Just imagine the shock they must have felt. They had witnessed Jesus die and be buried. Even though Peter and the beloved disciple believed the two Marys’ account of seeing Jesus in the garden near his tomb, none of the disciples had actually seen the resurrected Jesus, according to John’s account. The gospel says the disciples rejoiced when they saw Jesus. At first, they must have been in total amazement. But Jesus had already promised the disciples, “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18). In that same discourse he said, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, give I to you. Don’t let your heart be troubled, neither let it be fearful” (14:27). Now coming again into the presence of the disciples, his first words to them are, “Peace be to you!” (v. 19). Jesus returns after his resurrection to those who feel orphaned by the crucifixion.

This first appearance of Jesus in the upper room, was pivotal for the small group of disciples. It gave them hope and courage when they were without either. Because Jesus not only appeared to the disciples, but he gave them a mission and a direction. Jesus commissions them to go out in his Father’s name and spread the Good News, saying ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ As he brings peace to his frightened followers, so they are to be bearers of the same peace.

They are also instructed to forgive sins in God’s name and to refuse to forgive sins if need be. This rather strange instruction can be better interpreted. Jesus is not giving his disciples some special power to decide whose sins will be forgiven and whose will not. Rather, he is describing what it means to be sent; to make known the love of God that Jesus himself has made known. As people come to know and abide in Jesus, they will be “released” from their sins. If, however, those disciples sent by Jesus fail to bear witness, people will remain stuck in their unbelief; their sins will be “retained” or “held onto.” So it is a very important mission.

Jesus then gives the gift of the Holy Spirit by breathing on the disciples, to enable them to complete their mission in the world.

The disciple Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared the first time. The other disciples tell him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he says to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ We know the story of doubting Thomas – he wants physical proof that Jesus is real and not a ghost. And who could blame him.

Eight days later the disciples are together again in the locked upper room. This time Thomas, missing the first time, is now present when Jesus appears again. After saying ‘peace be with you,’ Jesus addresses Thomas directly. <sup>27</sup> . . . ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answers him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ and now does not demand to touch the wounds of Jesus. It’s interesting that Jesus offers to have Thomas touch his wounds, but when Jesus was in the garden, he discouraged Mary Magdalene from touching him, because he has not yet ascended to his Father. Maybe Jesus realizes that for some people, faith and belief is difficult unless we have physical proof. For us too sometimes.

Here are two things that we can learn from today’s gospel passage.

First, how community is formed. These two meetings with Jesus in the upper room created a new community of the disciples. It transformed a frightened bunch of disciples to people who now had hope, focus, direction, and courage. The new commission, and the gift of the Spirit from Jesus, had created a community which would now go out into the world and spread the Good News of the Kingdom. It marks the beginning of the church and its reason for being.

For the disciples, we can be sure that complete unity among them didn’t happen all at once. But as other people, such as the apostle Paul joined the group, they were incorporated into the new community, bringing their own unique gifts. This is a model of how a church can be for us here. When there is a strong core group with an agreed mission and vision of the church, others can be welcomed and embraced by that community.

Secondly, what can we learn about fear and doubt? As individuals and congregations, what keeps us locked in from fulfilling the mission for which Jesus has called and sent us? The natural thing to do when we are feeling anxious or threatened is to hunker down and lock the doors, to become focused on our own security, rather than the risky mission to which we are called. The promise of this text is that Jesus cannot be stopped by our locked doors or locked hearts. Jesus comes to us as he came to the first disciples, right in the middle of our fear, pain, doubt, and confusion. He comes speaking peace, breathing into our anxious lives the breath of the Holy Spirit.

What is more, he keeps showing up. As he came back a week later for Thomas, Jesus keeps coming back week after week among his gathered disciples - in the word, the water, the bread, and the wine - not wanting any to miss out on the life and peace he gives. And he keeps sending us out of our safe, locked rooms, into a world that, like us, so desperately needs his gifts of life and peace.

Time and time again, in spite of our sin and failings, our Lord and Savior comes to us and says: “*Peace be with you.*” And “*Do not doubt, but believe.*” Again and again, Jesus forgives us, breathes new life into us, and offers us the gift of new life in Christ, and the promise of the Holy Spirit.

He reminds us of our mission; to go and share the peace and the joy, and the hope of this new life with our world, that struggles to find peace, joy or hope. Again and again, he invites us to go. To go in peace, to love and serve our Lord.

Thanks be to God. AMEN