

Easter 2, Yr. A

April 19, 2020

John 20:19-31

Just so you know where I'm going with this sermon, the focus is going to be on second chances, or new life, or new creation. But before we get to that, I want to say just a word about John's Gospel. Unfortunately, for all its glories, it has been used throughout history as a justification for anti-Semitism. We get a glimpse of that in this morning's reading, which says that the disciples were hiding for fear of the Jews. That phrase "the Jews" is used over and over by John, usually in a negative way. And it's used in spite of the fact that Jesus and his disciples were themselves Jews. Biblical scholars have tried to explain this by saying that John meant "the leaders of the Jews" or that this Gospel was written at a time when tensions between the Jews who were Christians and those who were not was at a high point, possibly when the Christian Jews would have been expelled from the synagogue. Whatever the motivation, Christians need to be very careful here to recognize that this language can be used to bolster anti-Semitism. The fact that it was so used for centuries is a condemnation of the Christian church, something for which we need to repent.

Beyond that, though, this morning's reading is full of crucially important topics: I'd like us to look at doubt, and

peace, and what it means to be sent, and also what it means to be given new life – a second chance.

Let's start with doubt. This section of the gospel is often titled "Doubting Thomas." But I think that's quite unfair. If you look not only at this reading, but at the other resurrection stories, you'll note that pretty much every one of the disciples were in that same category. There was Mary Magdalene, who saw the empty tomb, but thought the body had been stolen. There were the other women who fled the scene at the tomb because they were afraid. There were all the other disciples who, when the women told them what they had seen, discounted it as "an idle tale." There was Peter, who saw the empty tomb, but apparently didn't draw any conclusion from it. So, even given those various experiences, we find them in this part of the gospel, hiding, fearful, and I would say, doubting. And really, who can blame them? As someone as said, if you can't count on the dead staying dead, what CAN you count on? I received one of those wonderful animated cards for Easter and it showed light pouring from the tomb, but nothing else. No one actually SAW Jesus rise and walk out of the tomb after all. So, first there's doubt. If we're honest, I think we all occasionally experience doubt. I remember hearing a talk by a Benedictine monk, David Steindl-Rast who said that doubt is natural and as long as

your faith stayed just a nose ahead of your doubt, you were quite fine.

We hear that the disciples are afraid of the Jews. But I wonder, after they heard those various reports that Jesus was alive, if they weren't also afraid of what he would say to them if he showed up. How would they explain their Friday behavior: their betrayal, their desertion, their assertions that they didn't know him? Maybe just as much as they fear the Jewish authorities or the Romans breaking down the door, they fear Jesus' rightful condemnation of them. So when he comes through the door, don't you think they all held their breath, wondering what he was going to say? I once heard something say that if one of us was in Jesus' shoes, we probably would have looked around the room, snapped our fingers and said, "Separate checks, please!"

But that's not what he said. Amazingly, what he said was PEACE be with you. Imagine the amazement and then the relief at the guilt being lifted, the betrayal and cowardice forgiven and then the joy. Just those few words: PEACE BE WITH YOU.

But we should pause here and remind ourselves what PEACE means in that context. Typically, we think of tranquility, of the continuation of the status quo, of nobody rocking the boat, of absence of conflict. But Peace, SHALOM, means much more than that. It means that

situation of wholeness, or general well-being, of flourishing for all God's creatures. The making of that kind of peace is what Jesus has been about: bringing in the outcast and the marginalized, freeing the sick from illness and the guilty from sin, breaking down all that is death-dealing, or diminishing, erasing the distinctions and the injustices that mean that some are first and others must be last, or some are rich and therefore others must be poor. He's reconciling all creation, showing that forgiveness and generosity and kindness can be lived out. That it's possible for enemies, like the Jews and the Samaritans, to live together and care for one another. He's living out the peaceable kingdom where the lion and lamb lie down together. He's modeling a new way of being in the world.

Fine, we say. Great idea, good vision. But then, the text says that he does two more things. He says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Wait! What? Look what happened to you, look what the world does to peacemakers and reconcilers. But then there's that one more thing, which is John's Pentecost, HE BREATHES ON THEM AND SAYS RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Yes, I'm sending you, but I'm also empowering you with the same spirit that created the world, the same spirit that filled the first humans, the spirit that has guided and animated me. Now it's yours as well.

While all of this is relevant to us, I'd like to point out that perhaps the most powerful takeaway here is the idea that this is the in breaking of the Kingdom, of a whole different understanding of God and of what we are called to. It's about starting over, about second chances. Just as Jesus' words of invitation and forgiveness allowed the disciples to leave their failures and regrets behind and move forward into new lives, we can do the same. Who among us doesn't have those regrets and failures that can keep us captive; who among us doesn't need to be freed from those things in order to move into a more expansive, more spacious, more loving life?

I'd like to end with two stories. One involves my son-in-law who was doing PhD work in Indonesia and who needed to get into Jakarta to renew his visa. He said that expired visas were greatly frowned upon by the authorities. So he needed to get the next plane which as I recall, was leaving on Thursday. If he didn't get that one, and had to wait until the next week Tuesday plane, he could be in trouble. So, he said, he tried it all, telephone calls, appeals in person, even a well-placed bit of money. Nothing worked. He was taking the plane on the following Tuesday. He said that as they were coming in to land, his seatmate asked him if he had heard what had happened to the Thursday plane. Turned out it had crashed into the side of a mountain and everyone was killed. I remember

hearing that story and asking him: now that you have been given your life back, what do you propose to do with it? That's what this gospel is about. Each of us offered forgiveness and peace. Each of us invited to a new life.

And finally, a story from Bishop Will Willimon about a church that he had been assigned to, perhaps as a student pastor. It was a small country church in Georgia. At his first visit, he found the door closed with a chain and padlock. They had been put there, he was told, by the local sheriff. When he asked why, he was told that "things got out of hand at the local board meeting, folks started ripping up carpet, dragging out the pews that had been given in memory of their mothers. It got bad. The Sheriff came out and put that there padlock on the door until our new preacher could come and settle things down." He said that typified his experience there and he dreaded every time he had to go. He lasted a year and tried everything he could think of, but nothing worked and he was relieved when he could leave it all behind. A couple of years later, he ran into a young man who told him he was now serving that church. "They still remember you," he said. "Yes," Willimon responded, "I remember them too." "Remarkable group of people," the young man said. "Remarkable," he replied. "Their ministry to the community has been a wonder," the young man continued. "That little church is now supporting, in one

way or another, more than a dozen of the troubled families in the area. The free day care center is going great. Not too many interracial congregations like them in this area either.” Willimon said he could hardly believe what he was hearing. “What happened?” he asked. “I don’t know,” came the reply. “One Sunday, things just sort of came together. It wasn’t anything in particular. It’s just that, when the service was done, and we were on our way out, we knew the Jesus loved us and had plans for us. Things fairly much took off after that.” Willimon said that he thought he knew what had happened. “I think that church got intruded upon,” he said. “I think someone greater than I knocked that lock off the door, kicked the door open and offered them peace, forgiveness, mission and the Holy Spirit. And now, they are called ‘church’. We are church, not because of the building we’ve built and cared for, not because of the organ or the preaching. We are church because to us, even to us, Christ has come and given us his gifts of Spirit, mission and forgiveness, commissioning us to give them to the whole world in his name.”

I would say that, in these times, the opportunities we have to take our own second chances to live lives of service and meaning are plentiful. Many of you have already found ways to do that right in our community. When this crisis is finally over, we’ll have a larger task before us because the cracks and wounds of our society have been

made visible and there will be even greater opportunities for reconciliation and remaking systems that have failed so many, for healing divisions and, in general, for bringing the kingdom to a reality. So to each of us Christ says: Peace, forgiveness, I send you empowered to live a new life. Dare we say yes? Amen.