

“Peace and the Power to Forgive and Be Free”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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John 20:19-31

The disciples were going nowhere fast, imprisoned in a locked room, not by those who had killed Jesus, but trapped in that space, paralyzed by their own fears. It was an understandable, natural human reaction. Jesus had been brutally tortured and executed only days before, so it’s only logical for the disciples to have assumed that his closest known associates would be next.

Most awful, though, was the terrible uncertainty. The disciples didn’t know their status, what to expect from the authorities. There was no internet or radio or television to blare out 24/7 that they had become public enemies, fugitives from justice. There were probably plenty of rumors, though, floating around to keep their fears stoked up. Choosing what to do must have been excruciating. So bound by their fears, the disciples ironically gave their oppressors precisely what they wanted by staying concealed from others and quiet about Jesus.

You might think that word of Jesus’ resurrection would have roused them out of their hiding, inspired them to seek out Jesus, but the disciples didn’t budge. Maybe they didn’t believe Mary Magdalene’s story, how she saw and spoke with Jesus in the garden. In that culture, women were considered unreliable witnesses. Of course, Peter and the beloved disciple had seen the empty tomb with their own eyes, but they weren’t quite sure what to make of it. As John tells us, “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” [20:9]

We also need to consider that as word about Jesus’ resurrection spread, the situation grew more dangerous for disciples, not less. The group that conspired to crucify Jesus must have been

infuriated by the stories of an empty tomb starting to circulate. Their fears and hatred and jealousy had motivated them to violence already. The news of resurrection would have amplified those emotions and made them more lethal than ever.

Into their fear, their uncertainty, into their self-imposed prison, Jesus came, as he so often does, to meet the disciples in their weakness and vulnerability. That barred door, such a paltry protection, was no match for Jesus' love. He overcame their anxiety with four simple words, "Peace be with you." Then Jesus breathed on them, filling the disciples with the Holy Spirit, that great creative life force. Jesus also gave them authority. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

We don't know what else Jesus might have said or done in that first post-Resurrection encounter with his disciples. Surely, they had questions, but if they asked them, John doesn't record it. Nor does Jesus offer an explanation for how the resurrection happened or what the plan was moving forward. As John readily admits, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book."

Apparently, simply being present was enough. Jesus calmed their fears with his peace. Jesus reinvigorated the disciples with the creative potential of the Holy Spirit. He gave people who felt powerless a sense of purpose by conferring on them the authority to forgive sins. Yet when Jesus returned a week later, they were still in the same room with the doors shut.

We might expect that their initial experience of the risen Christ would have been enough to propel the disciples out into the streets to share the good news, but John indicates that a week after the resurrection, the disciples had stayed put. Eventually, they would venture out and proclaim the Gospel forcefully, as today's passage from The Acts of the Apostles reveals, but in those early days, the disciples seem timid, reluctant. Perhaps that was part of the plan, to keep

them concealed until it was safe enough for them to come forward and witness to others the love of Jesus that conquered the grave.

We can certainly sympathize with them. We frequently feel fear. In fact, we live in a culture saturated with fear, a culture that manufactures fear: fear of inadequacy; fear of change and its unknowable implications and consequences; fear of uncertainty in a complicated, unpredictable world; fear of not belonging and becoming lonely and isolated; fear of being rejected because we don't fit in; fear of being embarrassed and ridiculed because of our faith.

Fear is a tool intentionally wielded by those who seek to manipulate and control us, by those who want to turn people into consumers, bombarding us with messages that insist the answer to every ill is to buy something that will make us feel more powerful or popular. Fear is a tool used by those who want us to forget the common good and the legacy we leave to future generations and to focus instead on our own short-term self-interest and gratification.

Our fears are less visceral than those suffered by the original disciples, who had ample reason to fear for their freedom and even their very lives. However, our fears remain real and often deter us, keeping us locked away in a self-made prison. We seek escape by pursuing attractive distractions and entertainments, but none of that really makes us free.

Yet just as he did with the original disciples, Jesus comes to us. He meets us where we are to be present in the midst of our fears, to liberate and release us, whispering "Peace be with you." That peace which the world cannot give, that peace which surpasses all understanding, Jesus gives to us: freely, because he paid the cost on the cross. Jesus gives us peace without precondition, because he knows that his peace once accepted changes a person. It renews our priorities, our motives, and our perspective. Where we once saw nothing but problems, the

peace of Jesus reveals challenges and opportunities, because peace is the soil where seeds of hope can be planted and flourish and bear fruit.

Just as Jesus breathed on his first disciples, so too does Jesus breathe on us, inspiring us with insight that empowers us to trust God and to trust our God-given gifts and to unleash our creative potential for God's glory and for the accomplishment of God's purposes. Now you may not think of yourself as a creative person, but you and everybody else on this planet is created in the image of God, our Creator. We are naturally made to be creative, and in a world dominated by destructive forces, we are called to serve as agents of restoration, so that all people can enjoy the goodness of God.

Perhaps the most creative endeavor we can pursue is to forgive sin. Forgiveness brings peace to both the offender and the victim. Forgiveness reconciles relationships and helps make communities whole. Forgiveness sets people free. Now forgiving can take time, and being patient in our fast-moving world is awfully difficult. Forgiveness may even seem impossible sometimes, but it only seems impossible when we try to do it on our own. To forgive, we must receive the peace of Jesus, we must accept the gift of the Holy Spirit, and with that grace, we can forgive, and forgiveness can transform our lives and our world.

The idea of being at peace, of being released from our fears and being liberated to create in myriad ways, but chiefly by recreating relationships through forgiveness, all of this can seem incredible. But among the many messages the resurrection of Jesus delivers is that through God all things are possible. It is possible to get cozy in our self-made prisons, and it is possible to break free from that confining space. It is possible to stay cautious and avoid risks, and it is possible to begin an adventure, secure and comforted by the peace of the risen Christ. It is

possible to deny our creative potential, and it is possible to make a lasting difference by exercising it.

When Jesus comes to you, in your locked room, what will you do? Amen.