

Peace Be With You

John 20:19-31

Crossroads Christian Church

Acts 5:27-32

April 3, 2016

Easter 2C

Every now and then, life brings us to hard times. Maybe someone we love dearly has died. Maybe a marriage has ended. Maybe we lost a job we loved. Maybe we face a long battle with declining health. Maybe we have lost the investments that we hoped to have for retirement. At such times, we are filled with feelings of fear, depression, heartache. Our worlds have fallen apart at the seams.

After the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus, the world of the disciples fell apart at the seams. The cause that they believed in seemed crushed. Their dreams were in shambles. That glorious vision of God's reign had become a nightmare of human brutality, of broken bones and spilled blood. The one that they had thought was God's Messiah, God's Son, had died an accursed, dehumanizing death. The priests were after them as heretics. The state was after them as failed revolutionaries.

In the midst of all that darkness, all that despair, there were rumors, stories about an empty tomb, but nobody knew quite what it all meant; or if it was just hope against hope. How could they confirm it? How could they know, against all the overwhelming evidence of his death, that Christ was alive? After all, seeing is believing—and they had seen terrible, terrible things, human cruelty at its worst. Jesus had tried to warn them, but what could have prepared them for that night and the following days of Jesus' torment, humiliation, execution, and burial?

The disciples were hiding behind closed doors on that Sunday evening—doors that were locked, chained, dead-bolted. They were enemies of the state, enemies of the religious establishment, and they feared that they were next on the hit list. In the ultimate locked-room mystery, who should come in? Jesus. There he was, his wounds visible, so that they would know that it was him. "Peace be with you," he said. "Shalom." Mary Donovan Turner, a Disciples Old Testament scholar, gives this definition of Shalom: "Prosperity. Health. Peace. Wellness. Completeness. Safety. Harmony. Satisfaction. Fulfillment. Unity. Victory. Restoration. There is not just one word that translates adequately the Hebrew word *shalom*. It means more than the absence of war; more than inner calm."¹ (unquote) In short, it meant just the opposite of how the disciples were feeling before Jesus appeared.

¹ Mary Donovan Turner, *Old Testament Words*, Chalice Press, 2003, p. 110.

Conventionally, Shalom is a greeting, like we would say hello, but in this case, it also meant, "It's okay. Don't panic. Don't be afraid." These poor disciples went wild with joy. Those rumors were true. Jesus was back. Jesus was alive.

Just to help them know that it was him, Jesus showed them the nail marks on his hands; the scar on his side.

"As the Father sent me, so I am sending you," he said. Over the past few years, they had been disciples, or students. They became student apostles when Jesus had sent them out to preach the good news back in Galilee. But when Jesus said, "I am sending you," they became apostles for real. Apostle means one who is sent out on behalf of another—like an ambassador is sent out by a king to represent him in another land.

Then he breathed on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he told them. (Breath and Spirit are the same word in Greek, so breathing on them meant that he gave them the Spirit.) He gave them power to forgive sins, or not to, as needed. The disciples confirmed that Christ was alive, and they were confirmed in their faith in him by receiving the Holy Spirit.

But wait. Someone was missing. Thomas wasn't there. Later, when they saw Thomas, they tried to tell him, probably while jumping up and down in excitement, as they shouted, "We have seen the Lord," but he would have none of it. "I have to see it for myself. I have to see the marks of the nails and put my hand on the wound on his side, or I will not believe."

Why did Thomas doubt? Why didn't he trust what the others had said? I think that it was because his heart had been broken, and he didn't want to be buoyed up by false hope. He wanted off the roller coaster of hope and despair. Thomas wasn't given to easy optimism, or to fantasy. Why set me up just to let me fall again, he might have wondered. Jesus coming back from the dead is too good to be true, so it must be false, he figured. So the other disciples went their way, and Thomas went his.

The next Sunday, they gathered again to worship, and this time Thomas was with them. Again, they were behind locked doors. And again, here was Jesus, saying "Peace be with you." And who did he go to first? Thomas. It was a special guest appearance for his sake. Jesus had gone out of his way to put Thomas at peace. "Peace be with you" wasn't just a greeting, it was the greatest gift that could be given to a grieving, crushed heart. Thomas's heart had been turned to stone by the pain of Good Friday; now it was a heart made to be filled with the love of the living Jesus Christ.

"My Lord and my God!" Thomas said, falling to his knees. "My Lord, and my God." Here's Thomas, was confessing his faith. "Do you accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?" we ask when someone comes down the aisle. Thomas said, "My Lord, and my God."

Then Jesus said, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe." (v. 29) A few hundred people actually saw the risen Christ as the disciples did there in the upper room. But many millions, billions, even, have come to believe in Jesus without seeing his physical body, or his resurrected body. Remember last week how I turned around the saying "A matter of life and death" to say that Easter was a matter of death and life? Today, I'm turning around the saying "Seeing is believing" to "Believing is seeing." It is through faith that we see Jesus Christ as the Son of God and our Lord and savior. It is through faith that we see God's presence in the world. It is through faith that we can come to see ourselves as beloved children of God—and then learn to see others that way, too.

Later, many years after that encounter in the Upper Room, Peter would write "Although you've never seen him, you love him. Even though you don't see him now, you trust him and so rejoice with a glorious joy that is too much for words. You are receiving the goal of your faith: your salvation." (1 Peter 1:8-9) In other words, believing is seeing.

Isn't it amazing that this fearful, cowering, defeated little band of losers, gathered to lick their wounds in the upper room, not knowing what to do next, would experience the power and presence of the risen Jesus Christ, and be transformed into joyous, brave, committed, and dedicated witnesses, who would take Christ's good news out into the world? We get a clue of that from our first scripture reading from the Acts of the Apostles. After many healings, Peter and the other apostles were hauled up before the Council, and scolded—hadn't they been given a cease and desist order, told not to preach about Jesus? "We must obey God, rather than humans," Peter replied, the God who had raised Jesus from the dead. And they, through the Holy Spirit, were God's witnesses. They would not, they could not be silenced.

Jesus has risen from the dead. That's the message of Easter. We worship a risen Christ, and in Christ we have the gift of new life. And we, too have been given the Holy Spirit, and the love of Christ to share to a broken, hurting world. Christ is alive, and suddenly appears in the locked rooms of our own grief, our own fear, our own despair, and then we experience a joy that can never die. Then we all can fall to our own knees and say, "My Lord and my God!" Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon