

John 20:19-31 “Peace Like a River”

I mentioned a few weeks ago about how it’s interesting that scripture speaks to us differently when we read it with fresh eyes. Like last week when we read John’s account of the resurrection. How many times have we read or heard that text but never paid much attention to the fact that the disciples were scared, holed-up, and sheltered in place? Same goes for this week’s text. Last week we left off with Mary Magdalene returning to where the disciples were and announcing that Jesus’ body had *not* been taken away, and that he had been raised from the dead. “I have seen the Lord!” She had the privilege of being the first person to testify to the risen Christ. Mary Magdalene: The first evangelist. “Guys! Jesus is alive and well! I’ve seen him!” What sort of impact did this news have on the disciples? Not much. Because our story *this* week picks up where we left off *last* week. The disciples were *still* holed up in their shelter behind locked doors because they were afraid the same people who killed Jesus would come after them too. Again, we’ve read this so many times, but how many times have we really been able to say, “Oh yeah, I know how they must have felt being holed up and scared?” Of course, there are some significant differences. They were locked down together. We’re locked down apart but still kind of together. And we’re not in a situation where we “fear the authorities” like the disciples did but some of us are definitely experiencing fear. We’re afraid of getting sick. We’re afraid of getting others sick. We’re afraid for those out there who are still working. We’re afraid because we don’t know what the next day, the next week, the next month, or anything will bring.

Thus begins our reflection on the appearance of the Risen Christ to his Disciples. Every time this passage comes up, we want to focus on poor old Thomas. We call him “Doubting Thomas.” I don’t what to focus on Thomas this week. I want to focus on what Jesus said to his disciples: “Peace be with you.” In this entire passage, Jesus says, “Peace be with you” three times. He says it in verse 19 when he first appears to the disciple on the evening after his resurrection. He says it again in verse 21 right before he gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit. In addition to

“Peace be with you” he also says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” which is appropriate, because he promised that they would have the Holy Spirit as an advocate and a helper for whenever they went out into the world. It’s the third time he says, “Peace be with you” in verse 26 that I’m interested in. This is eight days after he appeared to the disciples the first time. Eight days after he gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Eight days after he had commissioned them to go into the world and proclaim the message of forgiveness of sins. Eight days after Thomas missed out on seeing Jesus in person like the other disciples. Eight ... days. And where were the disciples eight days after he gave them the Holy Spirit and told them to go and proclaim forgiveness of sins? Still sheltered in place. Still afraid. “Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”

What is up with these disciples? I get how John goes out of his way to show that the disciples didn’t get it. It goes along with the theme that even when the light shines in the darkness, people still don’t recognize the light. But even after the risen Christ appeared to them? Even after he gave them the one thing that was necessary for them to go into the world and proclaim the good news? Why does Jesus say, “Peace be with you?” You’d think he’d say, “What are you all still doing here like lumps on a log? Get out there and do what I’ve called you to do!” You’d think the first time he appeared to them, he’d say, “Oh, here you are! Kinda lost track of you after the authorities arrested me, tried me, convicted me, tortured me and had me killed. I looked, but nope ... didn’t see any of you around!” You think he might even single out Peter and say, “I told you you’d betray me!” But no. Once again, he appears to them and says, “Peace be with you.” Into their confusion, fear, anger and shame, Jesus appears and says, “Peace be with you.” Think about how many of us are at home now behind closed doors, but even though our doors are closed, Jesus stands among us and says, “Peace be with you.” Jesus is still ... there. Jesus is still *here*.

Well, when I think of all the times when people have let me down, ‘peace’ is not the greeting which comes to my mind. If I’m feeling

mature and generous, I might manage a tentative ‘hey.’ If I’m not feeling mature and generous, I might just ignore them. I don’t want to offer peace to somebody who betrayed me and let me down. I want to punish them. Not in an obvious way, but in a nice, cool, polite way where I can withhold my attention so they feel compelled to punish themselves. I’m not going to chew them out. But I’m also not interested in discussing things. Instead, I prefer to lick my wounds in dignified silence as I quietly cut that person out of my life.

On the other side of that, when I think about all the times *I’ve* let people down, ‘peace’ is not the greeting I expect. And it’s probably not the greeting I *want*, either. Something inside of me wants to be punished. Not in an obvious way, but in that same cool, polite way that *they* withhold relationship from *me* and *I* get to feel vindicated. By withholding relationship, the person I let down shows a lack of maturity and forgiveness, which only goes to show that they never really deserved my loyalty in the first place. “Good grief, Jesse, you think too much.” Not the first time somebody’s said that to me.

But this is the way many of us deal with conflict, or disloyalty, or abandonment. Most of us could name a person or persons who are no longer a part of our lives, not because we simply drifted apart, but because one or both sides chose, at some stage, to withhold relationship. I’m not talking about situations of intentional, systematic abuse or domestic violence ... don’t misunderstand me here. Although God longs for reconciliation in these relationships, the safety of the abused often *requires* a separation. What I’m talking about is the way we humans tend to focus on the ways all of us punish each other for the slights and hurts of ordinary relationships. Because withholding relationship is a common way to deal with conflict, and because we’re all so used to it, we tend to just suppress our feelings and get on with life. We try our best to forget about that person, about the conflict, about the sort of people we thought we were and hoped to become. Sure, there are times when we lie awake at night because we feel regretful, but in the cool light of day, we’ve got other stuff to do.

I wonder if it was like that for the disciples. Jesus' death had rocked them to their cores. They had hung on his every word. They had changed their lives for him. They had responded to his call to be particular types of people, and maybe they *were* those people when they were with him. But when it really mattered, they abandoned him; and now he was dead. By any *normal* standards, the relationship was over. It was finished. He's dead! What can we do? And in walks the Risen Christ. "Peace be with you!" It's like, "You left me, and I left you, but here we are together again. Peace be with you. You hid behind locked doors, but I'm still seeking you out. Peace be with you." His greeting is the key to a new mode of relationship. The door to reconciliation and forgiveness is opened; the relationship is restored. All thanks to one little phrase – "Peace be with you." And in John's gospel, this is the key to what it means to be disciples. Jesus said, "As the father has sent me, so I send you... If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them."

The core of the disciples' mission is the work of forgiveness. They didn't learn this by lecture or sermon. They learned right here in Jesus' presence. In his greeting. "Peace be with you." But check this out ... The Risen Christ *also* said, "If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Cool! So does that mean we can withhold forgiveness? Because I can work with that! Yeah, but guys ... Jesus has just forgiven you of your betrayal. And you all have just been reconciled to the One they thought had abandoned them. I'd say this calls for a pretty big level of forgiveness!" Given this, how could *any* disciple ... then or now ... retain the sins of any? It's hard to imagine. And so they and we are commissioned to a life of peace and reconciliation where they are to forgive, forgive, forgive. Like Jesus, they are to offer peace to all. And so the ministry of reconciliation in the church takes shape.

You think the Corona Virus is contagious? This ministry of reconciliation spread like wildfire. Palestine, Europe, Asia, India and Africa. Then into the "new world." Even right here. The ministry of reconciliation has been passed on from person to person, from

movement to movement, all the way to us. Whether it's one person saying "I'm sorry" to another, or a great nonviolent movement for change, we are all a part of this peacemaking process rolling down through the ages. Every time we offer or receive forgiveness, we write another line in the story. It's a tiny line, almost invisible, but it's incredibly important. Because every time we practice peace we are maturing as people of the Way. Every time we practice peace we are participating in God's vision for all humanity to be reconciled.

And get this ... when we practice peace in *small* ways – among our friends, our partners, our children, our workmates – we are better equipped to practice it in *big* ways. And here's the hard thing, our peace may not always be accepted. But when we let go of our pride and our desire for retaliation, there is always a chance that we may disarm the other and surprise ourselves. There is always a chance that we might discover new levels of relationship. And this is what God longs for. And every time it happens, we embody God's good news of love, mercy, and peace. Just for a moment, we fulfil the commission of peace and forgiveness that the Risen Christ charged his disciples in the first century, and charges us with now. Peace be with you.