

“The Peace and the Power to Be Free”  
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John 20:19-31

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter is often called Low Sunday, because after the exertions of Holy Week and Easter Day, there usually aren’t many people in worship, especially compared to the huge crowds we saw last week. It’s also known as Thomas Sunday, because every year, we hear the same reading from the Gospel of John about “Doubting Thomas,” but we’re going to leave him alone today, because he was no worse or better than the others.

In fact, all of the disciples were stuck, 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 understandable, a natural human reaction to recent events. Jesus had been brutally tortured and executed only days before, so it’s logical for the disciples to have assumed that they, his closest known associates, would be next.

But the worst part was the terrible uncertainty of it all. The disciples didn’t know their status, what to expect from the authorities. There was no Facebook or cable TV blaring out 24/7 that they had become public enemies, fugitives from justice; that the dragnet was closing in. However, there were probably enough rumors floating around to keep their fears stoked up high. Choosing what to do must have been excruciating. So bound by their fears, the disciples ironically gave their oppressors exactly 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, their testimony in court automatically moot. 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 circulating about an empty tomb. Their fears and hatred and jealousy had already motivated them to violence. News of the resurrection would have amplified those emotions and made them more lethal than ever.

Into the disciples' fear, into their uncertainty and their self-imposed prison, Jesus came, as he so often does, to meet the disciples in their weakness and vulnerability. That barred door was no match for the love of Jesus. He overcame their anxiety with four simple words, "Peace be with you," and they rejoiced. Then Jesus breathed on them, filling the disciples with the Holy Spirit, that great creative life force. Jesus also gave authority to this small band who felt so helpless, so powerless. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Up until that point, the power to forgive sin had been limited to God and God alone.

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."

Maybe John didn't bother to include anything else, because Jesus 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 propelled the disciples into the streets to share the good news, but John indicates that a week after the resurrection, they were right where Jesus originally found them. Eventually, they would venture out and proclaim the Gospel forcefully, but in those early days, the disciples seem timid and 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 death.

Whatever the case, far from being critical, we 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 uncertainty in a complex, rapidly changing world; fear of not belonging, of being rejected because we don't fit in, and becoming isolated and lonely; 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, for instance, bombarding us with messages that insist the answer to every problem is to buy something that will make us feel more powerful or popular. Some people even talk about going out to shop as "retail therapy." 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 selfish short-term interests. Nobody wants to miss out. Nobody

wants to get left behind, and nobody wants to be a sucker. Nobody wants to be the sucker who sacrifices for the future when everybody else keeps on chugging along as they did before.

Our fears are usually less visceral than those suffered by the original disciples, who had ample reason to fear for the loss of their freedom and their lives. However, our fears remain real enough to deter us from really living. Fear keeps us locked away inside a self-made prison. Instead of being on the outside looking in, we're on the inside looking out.

Now, the prison started out as a fortress to protect us from lots of different things. There's that fancy façade of faux happiness to fool outsiders and even insiders about our hurt and weakness, saying "I'm fine," when that's actually a lie. Then there's the brutal wall of silence that disengages us from other people, from the public sphere, so that we can feel safer from conflict, criticism and embarrassment, and worst of all exposure to other ideas old and new that persuade us and change our minds and make us feel a little silly that we once thought and felt and acted as we did. Then there's that great wrought iron gate made of insecurities and fears, both of failure and of success and their consequences, a gate that stifles imagination and initiative. All of these defenses demand enormous energy, and none of them make us safe or 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 price on the cross. Jesus gives us peace without precondition, because he knows that his peace once accepted changes a person. It renews priorities, motives, and perspectives. Where we once saw nothing but unsolvable problems, the

peace of Jesus reveals challenges and opportunities. 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. When we think of creative people, we think of people who write books and compose symphonies and carve masterpieces out of wood or stone, but you and me 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 be extremely difficult, because it takes time, and we feel very pressed for time. Someone told me the other day, and this is far from the first time I've heard it, "You know what's wrong with the Episcopal Church? Your services are too long. I'm a busy person, and I have one hour for God every week." I guess those extra 10 or 15 minutes worshipping God is just asking too much.

It's hard to make the time to forgive, because being patient in our fast-moving world is awfully difficult. Forgiveness may even seem impossible sometimes, and perhaps there are rare occasions when it is, but that sense of impossibility around forgiveness arises when we try to do it on our own. To forgive, we need to receive the peace of Jesus. We need to 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, chiefly by recreating relationships through forgiveness, all of this can seem incredible. But among the many messages the resurrection delivers is that through God all things are possible.

We can get comfortable in our self-made fortress prisons, or we can break free from that confining space. In fact, we don't need to dig a tunnel or file away at bars, because when Jesus broke open the tomb, he knocked down the doors to our cells. So really, all we need to do is answer Jesus' summons, walk through that busted door, and join him.

We can stay cautious and avoid risks, and or embark on an adventure, secure and comforted by the peace of the risen Christ. We can ignore or deny our creative potential, or make a lasting difference by exercising it. When Jesus comes to you, what will you do? Will you walk through that unhinged door? Will you be in the same place next week as you were today, or will you have moved on in the peace and the power of Christ to a different place? Amen.