

Now What?
A Sermon On John 20:19-31
April 11, 2010
Second Sunday of Easter
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When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Tomorrow morning I will take Terry to her final chemotherapy session. An ordeal that began ten months ago with an unwelcome diagnosis, progressed through six weeks of daily radiation treatments, proceeded on to unexpectedly massive surgery, and finished with four months of aggressive chemo therapy will finally come to an end. Tomorrow we begin the rest of our lives together now completely entrenched in a new reality. We do not know what lies ahead. We are trusting in the efficacy of the surgery and the treatments. We shall continue do so until we are confronted with evidence to the contrary. We are first and foremost trusting in a God of life and hope so clearly made known to us in this Easter season and through your loving care for us during this difficult time. The question on our minds as we enter this new reality is the same question that confronts every follower of Jesus the risen Lord. "Now what?"

We live in a world that continues to be captivated by power and death. In the face of the media focus on death and anger and the immediate and renewed experience of Easter, I am moved to ask again if we are ready and willing to embrace the new reality that Easter brings? Does resurrection have something to say to us now in this life, or is resurrection an expected victory that waits for the apocalyptic end of days? If our faith defines us as the Easter people, as I fervently believe it does, what does that mean as we live in a world so captivated by hopelessness and fear? What is the attitude appropriate for Christian people who honor a God of love and who turn to the

life of Jesus to gain clarity on what that love requires of us?

According to the gospel of John, the first act of the disciples, upon hearing of Mary Magdalene's encounter with Christ in the garden, is to lock themselves up in a room. They went into hiding. They hid because they were afraid. Clearly, following the first Easter, the disciples display no expectation that the world around them had changed at all. On the evening of the first Easter day the disciples huddled in fear behind locked doors. The first word from the risen Christ to these fearful disciples is simple. ***"Peace be with you."*** The transformed Jesus breaks through the erected barriers into the presence of fearful and broken disciples with a word of peace.

What kind of "peace" might this be? Certainly the disciples had every reason to be afraid. The power of the Roman Empire to suppress and oppress was fearsome. The resurrection of Jesus did nothing to change that. The world of the disciples remained a dangerous place just as the world around us can be a dangerous place. I believe that the risen life as understood in the Christian heart is a life that knows peace in the face of danger. This is not a Pollyanna peace that closes its eyes to the realities we face. This is a peace that comes when fearful hearts put their trust in a God who will not be contained by the forces arrayed in opposition. This is a peace that comes when the Christian heart allows God to break into our fearful hiding and reside with us. This is not a peace that sees reprieve from suffering. This is a peace that suffering cannot suppress.

Following last Sunday's Alleluias many of us went right back into hiding in the dark places to which we have grown accustomed. Some hide behind the facade of control seeking to lock out anything that cannot be predicted or made to conform. Some hide behind the false front of helplessness seeking to lock out the necessity of taking responsibility for the circumstances of life.

Others hide behind a wall of toughness seeking to lock out the inevitable pain that comes with life.

In one way or another, even though Easter has been announced, each of us has retreated in fear behind locked doors. Like doubting Thomas we have heard the reports of the risen Christ, but until there is some kind of tangible proof most of us refuse to believe. We sing, "Up From the Grave He Arose" but we leave our alleluias in the sanctuary and look vainly in our everyday lives for proof that Christ is present. Few among us can stand face to face with crisis or trouble and in the middle of it declare, "I know that my redeemer lives." In loneliness we pray for a sign that Christ is present. In confusion we pray for a sign that will show us what to do. In terror we pray for a sign that we can hold close and feel comfort.

Today's story from John nearly takes my breath away. No matter how tightly we try to hide John tells us that the risen Christ comes through the barriers and greets us with a word of peace. "Peace be with you," he says then he continues, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Easter is not complete without this story. So what if Christ arose? If the disciples were allowed to hide in fear and refused to receive the risen Christ then no alleluia would be justified. If the risen Christ wandered around Galilee and never called the disciples out of hiding then he might as well have stayed in the tomb. There is no Easter unless we are raised from the tombs of our lives right along with Christ. The power of this story lies in the realization that there is no place to hide from Christ. Lock the door and turn out the lights if you will, but sooner or later Christ will appear in that tight place speaking a word of peace and calling you out.

And when you come out, do not expect the world to be any different or less threatening than when you went into hiding. Christ was not raised to magically change the world. Christ was raised to bring others to life as God intended life to be. The transformation is in you and in me. Thus

transformed and sustained by God's love we will change the world. The world is being changed everyday by millions of Christians who are alive in Christ, who have come out of hiding into God's world.

And what about Thomas? Well Jesus did provide the sign that Thomas demanded. But Jesus also declared that those who believe even though they have not received a sign are blessed. For an Easter people believing is seeing. Believing in the risen Christ allows us to see the world in a different way and to give ourselves over completely to God's plan. There is no proof of God. There is only the testimony of the gospels and the power of transformed lives.

Tomorrow morning I will take Terry to her final chemotherapy session. Tomorrow we begin the rest of our lives together now completely entrenched in a new reality. We do not know what lies ahead. We are trusting in the efficacy of the surgery and the treatments. We shall continue do so until we are confronted with evidence to the contrary. We also trust in the risen Christ who's first word to the fearful and discouraged disciples was, "*Peace be with you.*" It is that peace that will sustain us through whatever this new reality may bring. Now What? Christ is alive. See, he stands before you in the darkest place of your life speaking a word of peace and calling you out into the world. Choose a life that matters. Choose Christ. That's what.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Jesus and Thomas

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

The Purpose of This Book

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.