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Easter 2 John 20:19-31 April 19, 2020

¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So 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." ²⁶ A 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." ²⁷ Then 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." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But 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. (Jn. 20:19-31 NRS)

Grace and peace to you from our crucified and risen – and risen – Lord Jesus Christ!

Just for fun, I googled "When did the Christian Church begin. The first answer that came up was the typical answer: Pentecost. (It was) Pentecost, Acts chapter 2, with the noisy rush of wind, a flashy outpouring of the Holy Spirit, tongues of fire, speaking in foreign languages, Peter's sermon to a masses, 3000 converted. A big deal.

But actually you could make a good case that the Christian Church was birthed seven weeks before Pentecost ---- and without a lot of fanfare --- in a locked room. The Gospel of John tells us of the small-scale, low-key beginning of the Church on the same Sunday, in the same small room where Mary Magdalene had told a relative handful of people, "I have seen the Lord." (It has) no big crush of people, no crowded streets or parking lots, no pipe organ, no keyboard, no pews, no theater seats, no band, no choir.

On the first Sunday of Church, the Church had nothing going for it, except....

Except the risen Jesus. Undeterred by the locked door, Jesus stood among them. Church happens when Jesus is among us – even where only two or three are gathered.

That first Sunday, in John 20, Jesus does three things.

1. Jesus says "Peace be with you."
2. Jesus shows them his hands and his side.
3. Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

So, first, Jesus extends his peace. Yes, "Peace to you" was often a common greeting in the ancient world, like saying "hello." But Jesus repeats his "Peace to you"/ "Peace be with

you” and it echoes what Jesus said to his disciples in John 14: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you.” This is Jesus’ peace, Jesus’ broad shalom – the gift of wholeness and wellbeing from God – safety and goodness, based on the assurance that God is with you and loves you with full, inexhaustible love. Period. Full stop. Unconditional. When the risen Jesus appears to his disciples here, Jesus is gifting these few disciples in that small room with God’s peace, God’s shalom, in this broad sense.

That’s the first thing.

Second thing. Jesus shows them his hands and his side. Why? Why not skip that verse? Why not simply say, “Jesus appeared to them, said ‘Peace be with you’, and the disciples rejoiced”? Why include that Jesus showed them his crucifixion scars?

The answer is: these disciples weren’t so different from Thomas. Thomas gets singled out on the following Sunday, when he says that he won’t believe this is really Jesus unless he sees and touches the marks of the nails and the spear on Jesus’ body. But those disciples who were there that first Sunday didn’t believe Mary Magdalene when she told them she had seen the Lord; the second Sunday, Thomas didn’t believe the other disciples when they told him they had seen the Lord. So, on the second Sunday, Jesus is simply doing for Thomas what Jesus had done for those other disciples the first Sunday: “He showed them his hands and his side” (John 20:20) – his crucifixion scars – and then, they recognize him.

That is the second thing.

So we have Jesus’ gift of peace, and his resurrection scars. The third thing Jesus does here in John 20 is that he brings these two together.

When I was learning to fly, I had to learn how to land the plane – obvious, right? To land correctly, you have to raise the nose of the airplane while at the same time keeping the plane in a consistent descent. You have to coordinate the plane’s speed and angle of descent. You do this with the yoke and the throttle. Raise the nose too much or too quickly and you stall the plane and the plane drops like a rock. Raise the nose too little or too late, and you fly the plane into the ground on the nose wheel – not a good result. So you have to coordinate the two things: the yoke and the throttle; you bring them together to for a successful landing.

The resurrected Jesus brings together the peace he extends to the disciples and the crucifixion scars he shows them in his charge to them, “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” This is the Word of God to us this morning:

As the Father sent me, so I send you.

Two things are in balance here.

On the one hand, in our lives, sent out by Jesus, we have the peace of God. We have the peace of God. This is a gift, purely a gift. God loves you more than you can imagine. “I will not leave you orphaned, desolate, comfortless,” Jesus tells his disciples in chapter 14. And, borrowing words from the Apostle Paul, nothing – nothing – nothing – nothing can separate you from the love of God: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:38-39 NRS) This life-giving grace of God is yours. No matter what. Be at peace.

On the other hand, to be sent by Jesus as Jesus was sent by God the Father, means being sent to give of ourselves sacrificially for the sake of others – and that makes life harder, more uncomfortable. Genuinely caring about others adds to life’s struggle.

The risen Jesus is identified by his wounds of love. Jesus comes to us, not only as the risen Lord who has defeated death, but also as the one willing in love to be crucified for us.

Maybe this is the pattern: that people will recognize us in our resurrection bodies the same way the disciples recognized the resurrected Jesus. That is, maybe in some way our resurrection bodies will bear the marks of what we have given of ourselves for others, as Jesus' resurrection body bore the marks of his sacrifice on the cross.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” says Jesus. The life of the disciple, the life of one sent by Jesus, is a dynamic mix of secure peace – peace of heart, soul, and mind – on the one hand, and on the other hand scars, inevitable heartache, discomfort, frustration, and even real hurt because you care.

Without the scars, peace becomes smug, aloof, a silo of Pharisaic self-satisfaction.

Without peace, the scars mark a joyless grind, bitter resentment, and burnout.

In one of my high school science classes, we looked at cells through a microscope. (I don't remember what kind of cells they were. I think we scraped the inside of our cheek, for cheek cells. Does that sound possible?) We wanted to look at the cell structure. You couldn't just put the cells on the glass slide and put it under the microscope. You had to add some stain to the cells. The stain didn't change the cell's structure; the color of the stain just made it possible see the cell structure better. The cell structure was always there; the stain made it more obvious to see.

The Christian mix of both living in the peace of God and living in struggles connected with serving others for God's sake is always with us. But I think that the COVID-19 pandemic has put stain on the cell. We see the mix, the paradox, more clearly. It stands out.

Our congregations – you – are trying nobly to navigate how to faithfully abide in the peace of God when there is so much legitimate cause for anxiety. And you - our congregations – are trying nobly to faithfully continue your ministries of caring when it is not clear where one risk outweighs another risk. How much risk of getting the infection ourselves should we take in helping others, others who truly need help? And when we risk ourselves, don't we also risk everyone else we come into contact with, including family members? What is the right balance? Is there a right balance? Tough questions.

(There is) no doubt about it. COVID-19 has thrown us a curve ball we, in our lifetime, have never seen.

But the essential framework for being God's people, for being the Church in this world has not changed. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” Jesus says. Jesus continues to make and renew you – make and renew us – people of God's peace and people with sacred scars.

This is Christ's church today. This is who God has made and is making you.

I am in awe and struck by how innovative you have become in continuing your care for one another and for your neighbors: your food distribution, child care and education, recovery groups, and the list goes on – and in taking up new efforts: sewing masks for healthcare workers, caring for family members who are isolated, taking groceries to neighbors, and this list goes on. It is wonderful.

Nobody knows when we might be getting together again in our church sanctuaries. What I am hearing now is that our return to “normal” – whatever that will be – will be gradual, beginning with smaller gatherings at first, and going from there.

I like big church crowds, the buzzing excitement of a full sanctuary, rousing singing with a big group. I like being part of that. Probably most of us do. But there is also an element of seduction to it. We can begin to imagine that that is what makes God's church God's church. But it is not. Maybe the “Stay at Home” orders help us appreciate more the small

house where the Church began that first Sunday – not only for the perspective it gives us, but for the grace it shows us.

For all that we love about Easter Sundays, COVID Easter last Sunday may be the Easter that you will remember most deeply. And as you worship God this morning – one, two, four, or six of you in a room – as you worship in Jesus' name, Jesus is with you. The crucified and risen Jesus is with you in the hearing of the Scripture, in the prayers, in the songs, in the gospel preached.

“Peace be with you,” Jesus says with scars still new, “As the Father sent me so I send you.”

Amen.

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