

Peace be with you

Rev. Rebecca Jess

Easter 2 - Sunday, April 19, 2020

Though we celebrated Easter last Sunday, our scripture this week picks up right where we left off. John and Peter had been at the tomb; they had seen for themselves that Jesus' body was no longer present—that the linens that had wrapped him were left lying there, the head wrapping rolled up and set to the side. This was not a case of grave robbers, this was something different. Something to share with the other disciples—Jesus is gone; Jesus is risen!

But jumping to a mode of celebration wasn't in the cards for the disciples. There was still a great deal of fear. Our scripture today opens with the disciples gathered behind closed and locked doors. We don't know how long the disciples had been hiding out together, but we are told that it is the eve of Easter, so not even a full day has passed since the discovery of the empty tomb. Fear of persecution from the religious leaders who had pursued Jesus and put him to death still pervades. Or perhaps more than persecution: fear that the same thing could happen to them—death by crucifixion. And though Mary Magdalene proclaimed that Jesus had appeared to her, the disciples still aren't feeling confident enough to venture beyond their closed and locked doors.

So this is where we find them: closed up together. Perhaps they are thinking there is safety in numbers. Perhaps they are trying to work out what to do next. In any case, they are clearly not taking their chances as they gather together in one place: the doors are closed, the locks are secured.

And yet, somehow, Jesus arrives in that room. The doors and locks cannot keep Jesus out; his grace has a way of showing up even when least expected; his peace, as well. "Peace be with you" Jesus says to the disciples. This is a monumental moment; Jesus is among them! Despite their locked doors, despite their fear, despite his death just 2 days before, Jesus comes and offers his peace. Though, it isn't until after Jesus shows the disciples his wounds that they rejoice—peace may be comforting in some situations, but this is not a typical situation; their leader, their guide, their Lord, has been killed, was buried, and is... alive? Peace is probably a secondary thought for the disciples; knowing their Saviour is risen, knowing because they can see him and see his wounds, is what moves them to rejoice.

So, why then, does Jesus begin by offering his peace? Is peace in this moment of great fear, anxiety, uncertainty really all that useful? What good is peace when the reality is a group of men hidden behind closed doors, a group of men removing themselves from the world beyond those doors in order to find protection? How can peace help them? And yet, Jesus says this not once, but twice: "Peace be with you." Why peace? If Jesus really wanted to help, why not offer a game plan: solutions to the very real problems they are facing beyond those closed, locked doors? Ways to change people's minds about Jesus? Ways to go out into the world and feel safe from persecution or arrest or maybe death? Ways to regain control of the outcomes of their everyday living? If the continuing effects of the resurrection are to make an impact, how is peace going to help open the doors when there appear to be much bigger issues at hand?

The situation doesn't seem so different for us right now, does it? Here we all are, behind closed doors, huddled together with only those we live with, whether they be people or pets, or in some cases no one else at all. All this to protect ourselves, and others, from what's outside. Isolating ourselves to stay safe, to stay away from the precarious and risky factors that could determine whether we are healthy or sick, whether we live or die.

Like the disciples, we face fear. What's beyond our closed doors is out of our control. And that lack of control is scary. It means our manner of protecting ourselves and those we love is limited to the few things we can control; so, we close our doors and self-isolate. And if Jesus showed up in our homes today and said "Peace be with you," I imagine most of us might respond by saying, "Oh, thank you Jesus. Now, about this Covid-19 thing..." We'd be seeking a game plan, too; a solution to the problem of this pandemic. Or at least a break from trying to work and cook and educate our children and do errands safely and attend zoom meetings. Or on the other hand, a break from the monotony and loneliness of a life lived physically separated from others. Peace sounds nice. Solutions sound progressive.

When Jesus says to the disciples, "Peace be with you" it takes us back to the last time they were all together, and, once again, all in the same room. While sitting around a table, eating the Last Supper together, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27) What is it about the world that it cannot offer the kind of peace that Jesus does? What is the power in the peace that Jesus offers?

Well, the world cannot offer peace while it also throws out hurt and pain and chaos. It cannot offer peace while wars rage within it, while hunger pervades, while greed persists, while the wealthy get richer and the poor get poorer. How could the world offer peace when it insists on manipulation through power and fear and greed? Through misinformation and misplaced trust?

This is where the peace that Jesus brings is different. His peace is not the peace of the world. Because in spite of all the hurt and harm the world can and does inflict, God's compassion and care embodied in Jesus stands again amongst those disciples, in defiance of crucifixion. It is a peace that is *alive*. It is a peace that supplies courage, not just at the end of life, as when Jesus spoke of it before his own death, but at all those times in our lives when we feel most frightened, vulnerable, anxious, alone. At every point where we think that perhaps God's goodwill for the world is something unattainable, clouded by the hate and hurt and chaos of everyday living, that is when Jesus comes and offers his peace, for he is the very one who endured the brunt of that hate and harm and chaos, yet now stands in our midst—risen, indeed!

We cannot ignore the fact that when Jesus comes to his disciples behind those closed doors, he brings more than just peace with him—he brings with him the Spirit, the Advocate and Teacher he had talked about on that Last Supper night. Only now, the Spirit isn't just spoken of, Jesus takes a deep breath and breathes it upon each of them, sending them, commissioning them to go and share his peace with

others—that peace and life that is so much more than anything the world can offer. That peace that took the hatred of the world and responded in forgiveness, in love, in new life.

So, do the disciples take this peace, this understanding of forgiveness, this mission from Jesus to share the promise of new and renewed life, and go beyond those closed doors filled with courage and the support of the Spirit? Well, no. A week later, our scripture tells us, they are still behind closed doors. And this time they have Thomas with them, Thomas who refuses to believe that Jesus is risen unless he sees and touches his wounds for himself.

And Jesus returns. Once more he stands among them, greets them from behind those closed doors with “Peace be with you.” Again, Jesus offers peace first, even before he offers Thomas the opportunity to look at and touch his wounds. And I wonder if, this time, the disciples are able to see the power in that peace. Because this time they have the help of the Spirit with them; because now they can see in ways that the world cannot. Now they don’t need to focus their eyes on Jesus himself—that they have already seen. Now they can see the power that comes with that peace; the courage that comes with it, the forgiveness imbedded in it, the love that rises from it.

Now it seems obvious why Jesus arrived behind those closed doors with “Peace be with you” on his lips. Because peace is the game plan; peace is the solution. Not a peace we can find in the angry, godless, hurtful places of the world, but in the love and forgiveness of the crucified and risen Christ.

The world is out of the disciples’ control, but control is not what they need. All the disciples, and most notably Thomas, had their doubts. They sought ways to control the world around them, and until they found a way to do that they hid fearfully behind closed doors.

The world we live in today, two millennia later, is still ultimately out of our control. We hide behind closed doors, too, because of a virus, yes, but also because of our doubts and fears associated with all kinds of elements of our everyday living: about people we care about, about the economy and our livelihoods, about our purpose, about food and the climate, education and mental health, hidden abuse and paying rent, cancelled surgeries and appointments that can’t be booked.

From this passage of scripture we might want to think that the response to doubt is greater faith, but in truth, doubt isn’t such a bad thing to carry with us. No, when we need faith what we have to let go of is not doubt, but control. The disciples needed to have faith that what they couldn’t control themselves was in God’s hands. To be assured that the man who offered them peace and sent them out to represent God in the world was indeed their Jesus, the very one who was crucified, dead, and buried. They needed to trust and believe that peace from the one who overcame some of the worst of what the world could throw at a person, is indeed the triumph of God’s grace in the face of deep tragedy. Faith in God’s control, in God’s compassion, in God’s love and forgiveness. Can we let go of that control we wish we had in favour of faith? In favour of Christ’s peace in our midst?

Each week since the pandemic lockdown started, the ministry team at Armour Heights has put together a daily email newsletter to send out to our congregation and members of our community-at-large. And a weekly feature of that e-blast, as we call them, is a photo challenge. Each week we have provided a word or phrase to inspire folks to look at the world from a particular perspective. And recently our theme word was “Peace.” People sent in images of budding trees and sunsets. There were photos that featured people sitting together in quiet contemplation, usually in the outdoors. There was an image of freshly baked bread. There were videos with sounds that lifted spirits or soothed them. Symbols of new life. Moments of connection to one another and creation. When God first created the world, God breathed the Spirit over creation, and Christ breathed it upon the disciples, and we continue to breathe it upon our corners of the earth, showing the world and one another that peace is present, that new life springs daily, that love reigns. We need not fear when the peace of Christ is with us. With peace we can focus on our purpose—to spread the promise of new life—and our covenant with one another—to forgive and love.

So if Jesus came to us in our homes today, came behind our closed doors, and said “Peace be with you” we might not respond with questions about game plans and solutions, because we already know the answer: “And also with you. May peace be also with you.” Amen.