**April 19, 2020**

**John 20:19-31**

Today’s Gospel reading began on the evening of that first Easter. The disciples were locked in a room out of fear of what was happening outside. Miraculously and graciously, Jesus appeared to them there. He did not chastise them for being afraid or staying in seclusion. He did not push them out into the street. He simply breathed, “peace.” He showed them his wounds. Then the disciples recognized the Lord and rejoiced in him.

When Jesus returned to the group a week later (on today – a week after his resurrection), he called “peace” to the disciples again, then approached Thomas. Jesus had told people not to hold onto him, but he directed Thomas to touch and see. “Put your finger here. Place your hand in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” Then Thomas recognized and believed that the resurrected Christ was standing with him, too.

Jesus’ first acts after the resurrection were to show himself to friends. He wanted to establish the fact that while he had gone, he was now with them – in body and spirit. He had left them, he had been tortured, he had died, but *now* he was not dead. He reminded them that the journey did not stop at the foot of the cross. There was work to be done. Out there. Away from their safe places. And to do that work, they needed to strengthen their faith.

In doing so, Jesus was also preparing them for their next separation. He would be leaving *again*. These past days were just a trial separation. Now he was strengthening them for their final separation. He wanted them to have all that they needed.

Friends, we have been separated for weeks now. We have been locked away from one another, often fearing what lay outside our doors. But these difficult days have not (or *should* not have) put a halt to our Christian discipleship. Each of us have been challenged to do what we could in the places that we are with the resources that we have – time and energy and people we encounter and all. We have the Bible. We have a community of faith, friends in Sweet Hollow (and likely beyond) who support us in our faith, accompanying us and holding us accountable to what we *say* we believe. We have a lifetime of memories of sermons and Sunday School classes and mission trips and service opportunities and conversations with other saints to nourish us. All of these things are stored fuel for our hearts’ fires in hopes of strengthening us beyond the moments they happened well into our longer life. Now is the season to fan those flames and stir the embers. Now is the time to find those sparks of Christ that show us the way so that we *can* see God standing with us behind our locked doors.

Never in scripture was faith or discipleship described as something that happened easily. Instead, we see throughout the Bible that faith is a discipline we practice. It is a seed that we nurture. C. S. Lewis wrote, “Faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, *in spite of* your changing moods… That is why daily praying and religious reading and churchgoing are necessary parts of the Christian life. We have to be continually reminded of what we believe.” So Christians gather in communities to remind one another of what we believe. We worship even on days when we don’t want to sing a hymn of praise. We pray on days when we aren’t sure if God is listening or if God cares. We extend Christ’s peace to people who upset us. We serve people who we would prefer not to see or touch. We testify to what we have seen, even when we aren’t sure what it means. Practicing faith stretches us and opens our eyes to see what we may have overlooked and underestimated.

The disciples knew Jesus, and yet they overlooked and underestimated what he taught. They overlooked and underestimated who he *really* was. The overlooked and underestimated who he called *them* to be and what he called them to do. They had to be continually reminded of their invitation to faith. With every dawn of realization came a blunder. With every step forward came one step back. And yet, Jesus never gave up on them. Even after they betrayed him and abandoned him, he returned to give them peace and call them back to service. So the Gospel was written to us, who they knew would continue the bumbling tradition of discipleship; for, the final verses read, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are *not* written in this book. 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.” Jesus never gave up on them. *They* never gave up on us.

We must continue to stretch our faith muscles even while we are behind locked doors. Christ is with you, today, wherever you are. Christ is with us, today, behind these locked doors. And whenever the day comes when your doors are unlocked and you are freed to go outside, Christ will be with you then. Your work is not done. Regardless of who has fled or died or given up. Regardless of how tired or afraid or joyful you are. You work is not done. To do that work, you must strengthen your faith now. To do that work, you will need to show others your wounds. Tell them the stories of how hard it was and how amazing God’s new life became. Invite them to see your tears and touch your scars. This is the testimony that requires great strength and compassion. And you can do it. God breathes peace onto you and calls you back to faithful service.

It is not lost on me that Jesus called the disciples back to ministry they would be doing without him. He knew that he would be leaving again; so the ways that they would use their faith were even more important. And not trying to stretch the image too far, it is not lost on me that I am calling you back to ministry that you will be doing without me. At this point it is unlikely that I will be with you again in our sanctuary as one worshipping community. With each passing day my prayers increase for your strength as a congregation. I pray that you will carry on in good faith as soon as you can, with all that you can. I know that you have been wounded by this pandemic. I know that you will carry scars from the time in isolation. I fear that you may be wounded in the coming pastoral transition. So I pray that God’s peace will fall over you, bringing recognition and joy in the gifts given. And I pray that this will add more fuel to your faith’s fire to go out and tell the world just how good God has been to Sweet Hollow. That even after the deaths of some friends and members, even after the doors were locked, even after the loss of monthly income, even after we couldn’t be together, even *then* you have faith to share with the world. This is the good news of the Gospel! This is the promise of new life. This is the hope of the resurrection. This is the peace that passes understanding. Thanks be to God. Amen.