

Sunday, February 25, 2012
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Sermon - "Peace Be With You"

This small group of followers has had a tough week.

It was just over a week ago that they accompanied Jesus on his triumphant march into Jerusalem; followed by a week of violence and tragedy, ending in the death of the man they had come to call Rabbi.

Their hearts and minds have been on a roller coaster of a ride.

Now they are hiding, not certain whether or not they will be the authority's next target.

I can feel unsettled just thinking about them in that room!

But then, "Jesus came and stood among them."

There he is.

Dead center in the midst of chaos – Jesus shows up to calm everyone down.

This is the power of our risen savior.

Just as he came and stood among his disciples in that locked room, he will find his way into the midst of your life and offer you peace and guidance.

The first thing to pay attention to is that he is there.

The next priority is to hear what he offers.

"Peace be with you," he says twice.

One of the most powerful gifts you can bestow on someone is peace.

Think of a crying baby in the night.

Crying with hunger or discomfort and a loving parent gently picks the baby up, attends to whatever is causing the distress and gradually calms the baby and rocks them back to sleep.

Or picture a child who has had a nightmare. They call out, afraid, and again, a parent comes and soothes their worries, assures them that everything is fine and stays by their side until they fall back to sleep.

Or soldiers who march into an occupied territory, confront an enemy and free the people who have been hiding in their homes.

To be at peace means to be without fear, without discomfort, without worry.

It is our ultimate goal – to rest in peace.

We pursue this throughout our lives.

We struggle to find inner peace.

We dedicate our national resources in an endless quest for world peace.

We know that peace is what we want, we just don't know how to get it.

Jesus, however follows his offer, "Peace be with you" with instructions on how to achieve that peace.

First: "As the Father sent me, so I send you"

Jesus is encouraging the disciples to get out of that locked room – away from their fear.

Just as he answered God's call to ministry – he is now issuing a call to the disciples.

Go out into the world and give yourself to others.

Stop thinking about yourselves and get on with the business of caring for the poor, the sick and the lonely.

Jesus knows that once we move outside of ourselves our lives are enriched.

Next, my favorite: "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This is perhaps the most intimate moment in scripture, when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into the hearts and souls of the disciples.

He is bestowing on them his power.

He is empowering them with his own gifts.

He is transforming them from ordinary men and women into Christians.

He breathes new life into them, just as he breaths new life into us.

The Holy Spirit is what sustains us in our daily lives.

It is God's way of being with us, no matter where we are or what we are doing.

I encourage you to be open to the power of the Holy Spirit in your own life.

When you sense a spirit, receive it.

When Jesus breathes on the disciples, he says

“Receive the Holy Spirit.”

The power is there, you just have to tap into it.

He next instructs the disciples how to use this power.

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Jesus wants them to know that if they carry around the sins of others they will be burdened.

Forgiveness lightens the load--frees the one who is forgiving.

Think how much time, energy and effort go into maintaining ill feelings toward another person.

It can be exhausting.

But Jesus reminds us that we have the power to forgive, to let go, to move on.

We must have some compassion for these disciples at this point.

They have experienced holy week, crucifixion, resurrection, guilt, fear, awe...

They must have had a million questions.

We know that Thomas did.

Thomas is perhaps the most famous disciple in this passage.

His doubt has become legendary, reflecting our own doubts about God's power.

We are not told why he was absent, but we do know the result - he doesn't share the experience of his friends and, for more than a week, he struggles to believe.

That week must have been hard for Thomas.

While the other disciples were united in their experience of resurrection, Thomas was separated by his doubts.

It couldn't have been very comfortable for him, and he must have wondered why he had been left out.

I imagine that his worst doubts were not about Jesus, but about himself - had he done something wrong?

Was he not worthy of an encounter with Christ?

Yet, in spite of this, he does not allow his doubt and struggle to isolate him.

He stays connected, and ultimately Jesus returns to the locked house and comes to stand among them with the same greeting "Peace Be With You."

Thomas' experience mirrors our own.

Often people tell their stories of encounters with God and others stand by thinking, "I never felt that."

One of the primary reasons that we gather in community is to share our faith and to support one another on our journey.

Our faith is bolstered by the experience of others, by the prayers of others, by the kindness of others.

Apart from Mary's first meeting with Jesus there is no account in the Scriptures of anyone encountering the Risen Christ alone.

Every resurrection appearance, after the first, happens when the disciples are meeting together as a group.

There are a few elements to this story that intrigue me.

First, where has Jesus been for the week?

Second, why are the disciples still in the house after they were told last week that they were being sent out?

Third, would I have been able to believe the account of Jesus' appearance if I was out of the room?

It is in these details that the lessons for us are enfolded.

Jesus has been with the disciples, in Spirit, throughout the whole ordeal.

Just as he is present with us, no matter whether we acknowledge him or not, he is steadfast in his love.

The disciples are still in the house because it is nearly impossible for human beings to change their entire lives in a week.

Perhaps one person can make great changes, but here we have a group of 10-15 people, without a leader and possibly in danger.

How often do you commit to make a change, to do what God would want you to do, only to find yourself a week later, in the same pattern as before?

I had a phone call one evening last week from a political telemarketer.

She wanted me to rate the ‘appeal factor’ of candidate position statements that she would read to me.

I had to smile as she went through the script of utopian statements about taxes, the environment, women’s rights, education, the economy.

Of course, each statement was gloriously appealing, just not feasible.

I feel like the disciples must have had a similar experience.

I imagine them saying, “Yes, Jesus, thanks for the commission to discipleship, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the lecture on forgiveness – sounds great, but how are we supposed to get out of the house?”

We recognize that you are the messiah – walking through walls and all – but how are we supposed to take it from here?”

Well, this is how we take it from here.

We make up our minds that we are not going to be afraid of the world.

We commit our hearts and souls to spreading the good news of Jesus’ resurrection to anyone who will listen.

We decide to open ourselves up to the power of the Holy Spirit – to let it take over our entire being – to lead us on a journey of hope.

One thing we know for sure: Jesus will insert himself, body and spirit, right into the middle of chaos and grant us peace.

All we have to do is receive.

For this, I pray.

Amen.