

Sunday, April 7, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Christ's Peace is Yours”

I want you to use your imagination this morning, perhaps even close your eyes for a few minutes.

Imagine for a moment that you are one of the disciples in that locked room in Jerusalem.

Breathe deeply and think about how you feel.

The authorities have crucified your leader.

The women have reported that when they went to the tomb to tend to his body, he was gone.

John has confirmed that the tomb is empty.

Mary Magdalene has told you that she saw him in the garden and heard him speak her name.

As you review the events of the past few days, you are perhaps not particularly pleased with the way you acted.

You may be judging your peers for their response.

For the past months Jesus has directed everything you have done.

Now who is in charge?

Where will you go?

Might you be judged?

And then, he is standing among you.

The risen Christ is in the room.

Your heart beats with fear.

You tremble with awe.

You reach out and touch him to be sure he is there.

Now, take your own hands and gently touch the fingers of one hand to the palm of the other.

Move your fingers back and forth as you would to reassure yourself that this is Jesus.

Feel the wounds.

Feel the scars.

Feel the warmth.

Know that he is here.

Feel his breath upon you.

Breathe deeply and know that you are in the presence of God.

Now hold your hands gently together.

Again, feel the warmth.

Feel the contours.

Think about all the things these hands have done.

Think about all the lives these hands have touched.

Jesus came and let the disciples touch him because it is with touch that our relationships are made whole.

It is with the shaking of hands that we indicate trust.

It is with the pat on the back that we show our care.

It is with the holding of hands that we share our love.

You need no language to grasp another person's hands in delight.

Our hands are the tools that God has given us to communicate with one another, to build community.

Feel your hands and know that you are included in Jesus' commission, As the Father has sent me so I send you.

Peace be with you.

Open your eyes now.

Peace be with you.

With these opening words, a common greeting in Jesus' time, we are reassured that our God is a loving God, not a vengeful God.

It is reasonable to assume that the disciples might have been just a bit afraid that Jesus appearing among them was not all good news.

Jesus might be understandably angry with them for abandoning him, in Peter's case for even denying Jesus three times as he warmed himself by the fire in the courtyard, while Jesus was being questioned by the religious authorities?

It's frightening enough to see someone who was dead suddenly alive, but what if he had every reason to say,

"Where were you when I needed you?

What kind of faithful disciples are you, anyway?

Why did you run out on me?

Peter, you especially, I picked you out to be the leader; how could you have denied me three times?"

But that's not what happened.

There were no recriminations, no anger, no condemnation or judgment, not even an understandable expression, or "venting," of disappointment and hurt.

Instead, the first words Jesus offered were both greeting and gift: "Peace be with you."

He knew what was in their hearts and why they had barred the door.

He saw right through them and knew that they weren't re-grouping, and deciding on how they were going to carry on his legacy or spread his teaching.

They were scared and hiding out.

Yet, suddenly, in the midst of their fear and confusion, there he was, not with angels and trumpets, but quietly.

He brought only peace, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And most importantly, he brought forgiveness.

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

We can translate this into Jesus saying, "It's ok.

I know you weren't perfect, but it is time to move on.

I forgive you for deserting me, denying me, for running away when things got hard.

It's ok. I still love you."

He is encouraging the disciples not to dwell on their mistakes and shortcomings, but to trust in God and the Holy Spirit to move them forward.

He is saying, "I need you now to stop focusing on yourselves and your fear and go out into the world to do the work that I was trying to do."

What a lesson for us.

We too, often find ourselves immobilized by fear and uncertainty.

We too, can become so self-focused and judgmental that we lose our ability to act with compassion.

What Jesus is saying, and what we must hear, is that this is not just about us...we are called to go forth, with our doubts, with our fear, with our own anxiety, into the world to do the work that God created us to do.

We have spent a lot of time these past few weeks focusing on the art of forgiving as a spiritual grace.

Every Christian is called to develop the capacity to forgive others, just as God forgives us.

Because this is so difficult to put into practice, one author offered the following 8 steps to learning how to forgive:

- 1) Begin by assuring yourself that compared to Christ's suffering you haven't been seriously wronged at all.
- 2) Recall the many kind deeds that have been shown to you, perhaps even by the person who has harmed you.
- 3) List the benefits you have received from the Lord.
- 4) Thank God for blessing you with His love and forgiveness each day.
- 5) Make an honest effort to pray for the one who has injured you.
- 6) Go even further by looking for an opportunity to help that person.
- 7) If the offense is especially hard to forget, try to erase the memory by thinking gracious and generous thoughts.
- 8) Finally, before you fall asleep at night, repeat slowly and thoughtfully the message from the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive me, God, as I forgive others."

When we judge another, even when we judge ourselves, we often focus in on one particular event or act, losing sight of the larger picture.

In the midst of today's powerful story, we are witness to Thomas' need for proof.

Jesus' response to Thomas' need is pure compassion.

Jesus, again demonstrating forgiveness of Thomas for his lack of faith, appears among them and gives Thomas the opportunity to touch and believe.

And Thomas responds with an affirmation of faith, "My Lord, and my God."

Not teacher. Not Savior. Not Messiah. But God!

It is the only place in scripture where Jesus is called God without qualification of any kind.

It is uttered with conviction as if Thomas was simply recognizing a fact.

You are my Lord and my God!

These are certainly not the words of a doubter, but Doubting Thomas is the judgment that endures.

Thomas is remembered only for his doubt.

There is a continuum here – the beloved disciple saw the empty tomb and believed.

Mary Magdalene heard the voice of Jesus and believed, but Thomas – he needed to touch the risen Christ before he was willing to believe.

Perhaps you can identify yourself somewhere on this continuum of faith.

My friends, Jesus comes to us where we are.

We do not have to reach a certain point on our faith journey before we can know Jesus.

We need only ask and he will answer.

We need only to respond when he provides us with the message that we are able to hear.

We often say

"no matter where you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here"...well, Jesus demonstrated this first.

As I looked around the landscape this week the struggling daffodils reminded me of these disciples.

From the absolute bleakest environment, from the cold and hard earth, these bright yellow flowers are trying to emerge.

They stand up against snow flurries, cold winds, and harsh rains.

But they endure in their beauty.

Day after day, the daffodils defiantly herald a new beginning – Spring is here.

Easter has come.

We know from the first reading today, from Acts of the Apostles, that the disciples did overcome their fear and go out into the world.

Luke tells us that when the early church gathered they were all of one heart and mind.

I'm sure they didn't agree on everything, but their central focus was sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, the risen savior.

They were persecuted for sharing that good news, but they were in it together, supporting one another in their mission.

In a sermon on this passage Lawrence Farris writes, "This story teaches us the power of unity. Unity of heart and soul manifests itself in a community where all feel valued, where all feel welcome, where all can trust"... "Our calling," he says, "is to pursue unity. Not uniformity, but unity."

We are called to be an Easter people, living by grace, seeking the wellbeing of all.

I believe that these two passages today, read together, provide one of the most powerful lessons in the New Testament.

It reminds us that the risen Christ is among us, that he has filled us with the gift of the Holy Spirit, that he forgives even the most traitorous friends.

We are reassured that it is ok to have doubts about our faith.

These passages help us to see that we can emerge from a crisis, stronger, with a deeper faith and with the motivation to go out into the world spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

Whatever overwhelms us, God comes to us in the midst of our fear and says, "Peace be with you."

Whatever doubts churn in our minds,

whatever sins trouble our consciences,

whatever pain and worry plague us ,

whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely, God comes to us and says, "Peace be with you."

The next time you are feeling overwhelmed or alone, place your finger in the palm of your hand and gently trace a circle where Christ's wound might be and find comfort, knowing that he is here, in the midst of our suffering, and that he died for us so that we might live in peace.

My friends, let the peace of Jesus Christ be the grace that brings our hearts and minds together.

Peace be with you.

Amen.

