

April 23, 2017
1 Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

Unless

We begin, yet again, in the dark in the gospel of John. In our reading, the disciples have gathered in a room together. And it is evening, it says. So it is dark outside and the disciples are inside hiding, behind locked doors. The sun has gone down on Easter morning. And Christ is risen. And Mary Magdalene has seen the Lord. But the disciples haven't seen the Lord. They don't know it is Easter. They don't believe it yet.

Because it's hard to know unless you see it for yourself. It's hard to believe that it's Easter UNLESS Easter happens to you.

The disciples are together in a room on the evening of Easter. Literally and spiritually, they are in the dark. They have shut the doors and locked them for fear of the Jews. For fear of what may happen to them. For fear of those who might be out to get them. The 'Jews' as John's gospel calls the religious leaders, are the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the priests who conspired against Jesus. Who managed to get him convicted and crucified by the Romans. And what they did to Jesus, they could very

well do to his disciples. UNLESS the disciples stay out of sight. Unless they lock the doors. Unless they remain in the dark.

Yet again, the disciples are in the dark. Hiding in fear. Burying themselves as if they are in the grave already. And I think we can sympathize with those disciples. Because fear does that to us. Fear makes us want to hide. It shuts us down and closes us off. Scientists say that overrides everything in our brain. It makes our synapses up there take shortcuts. The brain signals skip over the cerebrum and the places of reasoning and logic—leapfrogging them and going straight to the subconscious.¹ Where it's all emotion. Where it's fight or flight or freeze. It's how our brains have evolved for survival. We react in fear. Instead of thinking. Or wondering. Or breathing.

Fear is such a powerful thing and it keeps us in the dark. It makes it so we can't think straight. And we can't believe in Easter. We can't do anything because we are too afraid of what might happen. And if you have been there, if you have been so afraid that you would rather stay in

¹ <http://bigthink.com/going-mental/how-the-brain-fears>

the dark; then you aren't alone. Many disciples, many churches have been there before; overwhelmed by fear; with the doors and the windows locked. Hiding from the world. Hiding from the culture that threatens us. Hiding from the powers that oppose us. Hiding from all that seems to be out to get us. With our faith short-circuited and our hope leapfrogged. Living in fear, as if that is where Christ left us. As if the powers in this world can define us; as if death and darkness have the last word. As if Easter hasn't happened.

And the fear is there UNLESS you experience something different.

Unless you see the resurrection for yourself, you won't believe it. Unless Jesus Christ himself ignores our locked doors and stands among us, we can't imagine that Easter is real. And Jesus knows that. He knows it can't be real for us unless we see him. And he does three important things for us. He gives us peace. He shows us the truth. And he breathes the Spirit into us.

The first thing Jesus does for his disciples when he shows up is he offers them peace. The first thing he says is: Peace be with you. That's what they need, first and foremost. Because Jesus' disciples do not have

peace. They do not have calm. They do not have the quiet joy of hearts unfettered by worry, free to live in love. No, the disciples' brains are overridden with fear. They are locked inside a room together, terrified of everything outside. So the first thing Jesus gives his disciples is peace. And bless their hearts, they need it. Because they have come by their fear honestly. They have lived through some terrible things. They have just lived through Jesus' crucifixion. They have felt the malicious greed of those in power. And watched as their Lord was taken and tortured and killed. And there is a real danger that the same thing might happen to them. There is a real danger that they will always live in this horrible fear. That it will shut them down. That their hope will be lost to the darkness. That their faith will no longer be faith in Jesus but faith that evil wins. But that's not what Jesus wants for his disciples.

Peace be with you, Jesus says. Peace be with you. He repeats these words two, then three times. Peace be with you. They were very necessary words. They were necessary for the early church as it struggled with persecution. They are necessary for the church now as it struggles with anxiety. It's necessary for Jesus to say those words to us

over and over again. Peace be with you. Jesus says, I know you are afraid. You are afraid the world is out to get you, that life is out to get you. Peace be with you. You are afraid of what might happen next, of who or what might hurt you next. Peace be with you. You are afraid that God can't do anything with this world or with the terrible situation that you are in. Peace be with you. You are afraid that God can't do anything with you, that God could never do anything with a hopeless, faithless person like you. Peace be with you.

Peace be with you, Jesus says. Here, have my peace. Take my peace.

Keep my peace in your hearts and in your minds. I have come into this little space where you've locked yourself away, to free you from fear and guilt and shame. And the worry about being so little and having so little. Peace be with you, Jesus says. They are necessary words for us.

And they are the first words Jesus says to his disciples after the resurrection. Notice, Jesus' first words are not a rebuke. Jesus doesn't give the disciples a stern talking to and an outline of all the things they have done wrong. He doesn't start trash-talking his enemies or making a plan for revenge against the sinful world. And if Jesus doesn't do any of

that, first and foremost, then why should we? Why should the church? What should we do but have Christ's peace, first and foremost, in our lives?

First, Jesus gives us peace. And second, he shows us the truth. He shows us his hands and his side. He shows us that he truly did live and die for us. That he truly was up on that cross. That he truly suffered. And that the world truly does not understand God. But that God loves us nonetheless. Jesus showed us the true cost of love. How far God will go for us. How much God will give for us, so that God can be ours and we can be God's. Because of those wounded hands and the pierced side, we belong to God now forever. We have a new heavenly inheritance, as it says in 1 Peter, imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. St. Augustine put it this way in the 5th century, "Humanity was held captive under the devil, but [we] were redeemed from captivity... The Redeemer came, and gave the price; He poured forth his blood and bought the whole

world.”², he says. In the scars of Jesus’ body, we see the truth of how much God loves us.

In Victor Hugo’s novel, *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean is put in prison for stealing bread for his starving family. In prison, he becomes hardened to the world and to others. When he is finally released, he can’t get a job or find a place to stay until a church bishop takes him in. The bishop treats Jean Valjean with kindness, but Jean has been so hardened by hurt and hatred that he cannot accept the bishop’s love. One night, Jean steals the bishop’s silver cutlery and goes on the run. But Jean is caught by the police and brought back to the bishop. The bishop, however, does not condemn Jean, he greets him, "I'm glad to see you," he says. "You have the silver place settings, but I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest and would bring a great price. Why didn't you take them along with your cutlery?" The bishop insists that the police release Jean Valjean. And as he hands him the candlesticks, the bishop holds Jean just a moment longer saying: "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no

² Augustine of Hippo, *Enarration on Psalm 95*, no. 5

longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts...and I give it to God." ³

The truth about love is that it is costly. It is freely given but it is not cheap. And loving like Jesus loves, it will wound us and scar us, as it wounded and scarred Jesus. That is the truth of the cross. That is the truth of having life in him. And we know it when we see it. We believe it when we experience it. In the worn bodies of those who work for love. In the tired faces of those caring for a sick child or those looking after parents in declining health. In the worn hands and calloused feet and broken hearts of those caring for the least and the last and the lost. Loving others at any cost, it is very costly. And we know that, when we see Jesus' hands and his side. We know the truth about God.

Thomas knew that. Doubting Thomas we call him. But he should be called Certain Thomas or Thomas Without-Any-doubt. Because there was no doubt in Thomas' mind that the scars were what made Jesus who he was. That HIS Lord had been wounded. That HIS Lord gave his life.

³ Victor Hugo, Les Miserables

That HIS Lord had loved to the very end. And Thomas wouldn't believe it was Jesus unless he saw for himself the evidence of that love. "Unless I put my finger in the nail holes and put my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Unless we see the truth. Unless we experience it for ourselves. Unless we can know that this love is really real, and that it really is for us. And that it really doesn't end, and it really can't be stopped. We can't know UNLESS we are shown that truth in the flesh and blood. And we want the truth like Thomas wanted the truth. Like everyone in the world today wants the truth. We want love that is real. We want love that puts others first. We want love that is wounded and scarred from its fight with the devil, but never gives up. We want love that never stops being love.

That's what Jesus shows us that God is about.

Jesus shows us the truth. He gives us peace. And finally, he breathes his Spirit into us. In our scripture, Jesus speaks peace to his disciples and shows them his hands and his side, and then he breathes his own breath into them. He gives them the Spirit. Just like God breathing life into Adam and Eve, Jesus breathes life into his disciples. He gives them air.

He gives them oxygen and space and grace in that dark, locked room. He gives them hope. Breathe in, breathe out. Be alive. Inhale and exhale.

And go out into the world. Just breathe. Jesus wants us to just breathe. In all those closed-in spaces where we find ourselves. In the dark places we have buried ourselves. Wherever we have locked up love and locked out hope and fear has leapfrogged faith. Breathe in, Breathe out. God's Spirit has life for us. Receive it. Expand with it. Feel its power. Let it fill you. Let it open up that grave you are in. Inhale, exhale. Breathe. And go out into the world full of the life from God that doesn't end.

Christ is risen. Easter has happened. But we don't know it UNLESS we know that Jesus gives us his peace. And shows us the truth of his love.

And intrudes into our locked-up, fearful spaces and breathes God's Spirit into our lungs. May we truly see the Lord. May we truly know the Lord among us. May we truly share in his life and his grace.