

## Sermon: Behind Locked Doors

Good Morning, everyone. Christ is Risen! This is the Sunday after Easter - sometimes called "Low Sunday" - maybe it's called low in comparison to the high of last week when we celebrated Easter - that Christ is Risen, indeed. But in our reading from John's Gospel today - it's still Easter, it's Easter night, to be precise. The disciples are hiding in a locked room somewhere in Jerusalem - and as far as they know, Jesus is dead and gone - his body quickly buried in a borrowed tomb. Here's what it says in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, vs 19-23:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the [Religious Authorities], Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

So what just happened?

Jesus appears before the disciples - the first thing he says is "Peace be with you." In fact, he says it twice, so maybe he has more going on here than just a greeting. Here's the disciples, sitting in a dark room with the windows shut tight, cloth covering the openings, huddled behind locked doors, scared out of their wits and suddenly the Resurrected Christ is with them - and he gives them - peace. Shalom, he says: in the Hebrew it means something like "May God give you every good thing." That's God's peace - in all our times of fear, in our dashed hopes, whatever we might be facing - Jesus comes to us and gives us peace. That's his promise to us. He'd already told the disciples before this - he said, "In this world you will have tribulation but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid." Jesus didn't promise no tribulation. In fact, following Jesus has often meant more of it - but - Jesus' disciples throughout the ages have been given something unique - something God given - this gift for frightened disciples of every age. Jesus gave us peace.

The second thing Jesus does then - is he shows them his scars. Isn't it something that **that** was how the disciples recognized him? Not by his face. Not by his clothes - his physical appearance - but by his scars.

There's a line in a Thornton Wilder play, that says: "In love's army, only the wounded soldiers can serve." Now, that's good news for wounded disciples who carry their own scars. Before Jesus, it used to be the rule that no scars were allowed. In the sacrifices - the offerings to God in the temple - only unblemished animals could be sacrificed.

The rule was: no scars, no ugliness. And here we have Jesus holding out his hands - showing his feet and his wounded side. Isn't it a wonder that we've come to know the full revelation of God - by God's scars. His wounds for us.

The book of Isaiah says: "by his wounds we are healed." The resurrection is not just about a dead man come back to life. It's about whether you can permit in your horizon this new healing power - new surging possibility - that makes new life possible in all the scarred places. More often than not, it's our scars that become the vehicle to this wounded savior who has the power to make human life possible in all the hurt and failed places - a better self can prevail.

It's a tragedy whenever folks get the impression that the church of Jesus Christ preaches a gospel for the unscarred: that God takes only the unblemished ones - the perfect ones - the beautiful ones. How did the disciples come to know Jesus was in their midst? Because of his scars. And disciples of every age - come to recognize him - in the scars and the wounds of others.

The third thing Jesus did was he gave them the Holy Spirit. "Jesus breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and that word "Spirit" in the Greek is pneuma - it means "breath" - "spirit."

In ancient times it was believed that your breath contained your essence, your life force. In our creation story, God breathed life into humankind - it says that it was in God's image, in God's likeness that he created them. And now, here's Jesus giving them his own breath, breathing on them his likeness, coming to dwell in them and work through them, with the power of the Holy Spirit, to help heal a broken and hurting world. The disciples were empowered that night when Jesus breathed on them - giving them the Holy Spirit. What he left his followers was this power-breath-spirit: Empowering us. Keeping us going. Helping us do what we thought we could never do. He left us his spirit.

And the last thing Jesus gives the disciples is this strange, new authority. He says, "As the Father sent me, so now I'm sending you...If you forgive the sins of any...they are forgiven.

Could the disciples forgive sins? No, (beat) What Jesus' followers can do is make the announcement of God's forgiveness. We can be messengers of God's forgiveness.

The first book that Frederick Buechner wrote after his conversion was a novel called *The Final Beast*. It's the story of a young pastor - his wife has died - raising his children alone - the church is giving him a hard time - he's not coping well with his life - and a woman in town comes to him for counseling- she's committed adultery - her husband knows about it - she wants to keep her marriage - she feels terrible guilt about it all and on top of it - she's unable to have children of her own.

And there's this underlying attraction between the pastor and this woman. In desperation, the woman leaves town - gets a hotel room nearby and leaves a note for the pastor saying, "I'm at such and such hotel. No one else knows. Do not come."

The pastor has a dilemma: he's afraid to go because of his feelings and what could happen. But on the other hand, he's afraid she'll do something desperate.

He goes to see an old wise woman. He tells her the story - his dilemma, his fears - all of it. And when he's through, she tells him to go and help the woman. "Give her what she really wants," she says. He says, "Give her what, for Christ's sake?" She says, "For Christ's sake, give her the only thing you have to give... Forgive her, for Christ's sake." He says, "But she knows I forgive her." The old woman shakes her head: "She doesn't know God forgives her. That's the only power you have—to tell her that. Not just that he forgives her the poor little adultery. But the faces she can't bear to look at now. The man's. Her husband's. Her own, half the time. Tell her he forgives her for being lonely and bored, for not being full of joy with a houseful of children. That's what sin really is, you know---not being full of joy. Tell her that her sin is forgiven because whether she knows it or not, that's what she wants more than anything else---what all of us want. What on earth do you think you were ordained for?"

He follows the old woman's advice - goes and finds the woman - they talk - and toward the end of this scene - he moves toward her. And the book says:

"With the palms flat against her temples, he tipped her face to him, and raised her own hands and pressed them against his so that each seemed to be preventing the other's escape...he heard himself pronounce like a stranger: "The almighty and merciful God pardon and deliver you, forgive every face you cannot look upon with joy..." And the burdens of her life, great and small, began to melt away and she was healed. When she got home, the first thing she did was to make love to her husband. And it was at that moment that this woman, trying for years to have a child, conceived and found herself pregnant."

Jesus said that our task is to lay hands on their heads and tell them that God forgives them.

Jesus came to his disciples. And he brought them peace, that peace that really does pass all understanding. He brought them his own scars, dignifying the pain of us all, and the Spirit - breath and empowerment. And then he gave them a strange and wonderful authority. That we can be forgiven, and all the hurt and pain and sin we have caused can melt away and be gone forever. May those words of forgiveness be ever in your heart - and may they always, ever, frequently on your lips. Thanks be to God. Amen.