

SERMON: April 11, 2010

2nd Sunday after Easter

Texts: Psalm 150; Acts 5:27-32; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

Living Beyond Closed Door

This morning the stories of the resurrection of Jesus continue. When last we gathered we learned through experience of the women and some of other followers of Jesus that Jesus is alive. Today we begin to see what impact that announcement has on the disciples.

For many of the followers of Jesus, it was a day filled with fear. They dared not to be seen together, at least not in large numbers. If they gathered together, someone might recognize them as followers of Jesus. They were afraid that the political and religious authorities would now turn on them. The last place they wanted to be was in Jerusalem.

To make matters worse, there were rumors that the body of Jesus had disappeared. Some say that the Roman soldiers had stolen the body. Others said it was the Jews. But then there were the other words spoken only in whispers, that Mary Magdalene had seen Jesus, and that he was anything but dead.

It is hard to know which story was the most frightening: the story that said that Jesus was dead and his body stolen; or the story that said that he was alive. A stolen body meant that the assault on Jesus by his accusers was not over, and that it was only a matter of time before they were seek out and destroy his followers. That was certainly something to fear.

But the story that Jesus was seen alive was equally terrifying. There was no doubt that Jesus had died on the cross. There was no doubt that Jesus had been buried in the tomb. Everybody knew that the dead cannot come back to life. If the dead are seen again then they must be ghosts. It would be just as frightening to know that the ghost of Jesus was walking around as it would be to know that his body might have been stolen.

So there was only one thing to do – get out of town. But before the fleeing, there is one more meeting of the disciples. After night falls they each quietly make their way to the house. Hopefully nobody saw them, or recognized them along the way. But just to be sure, the door to the room must be locked.

In the dim glow of the oil lamp, they become aware that they are not alone. Someone else has entered into the room, or should we say something else? The door does not open, but suddenly there is this presence which fills them with terror. It appears to be a man, a man who looks like Jesus. It must be a ghost!

But then they hear his voice: "Peace be with you." In just the few moments that it took to speak these words, the fear that had a grip on the disciples disappeared. It was a voice that had assured them so many times before that they had nothing to fear. It was a voice that spoke of love and compassion. It was the voice of Jesus, saying to them the very words that they had heard before, "Peace be with you."

The last time they heard those words, they were in the Upper Room, sharing the Seder meal with Jesus. Jesus says to them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." They were strange words to the disciples at the time, for the last thing that they thought would happen was they Jesus would leave them. But just the way he said it made an impression on them, as if something important was about to happen.

So much has happened since last they heard those words. It seemed like they would never hear his voice again. Yet once again they hear the words, "Peace be with you." There is no mistaking that this is the voice of Jesus. Moreover, it is not just his voice, but also his body, wounds and all. "Peace be with you," he again says to them, adding these words, "Just as the Father has sent me, so now I send you." With these words Jesus commissions them to be the tellers of the story, responsible for sharing the Good News of the love of God as shown to them through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

One of the first persons they tell is Thomas, who was not with them that night of Jesus' appearance. Thomas finds their words too incredible to be true. "What do you mean you have seen Jesus? What do you mean he is really alive? Your words, my dear friends, are too good to be true. I want to believe it, I truly do; but I cannot believe it until I see him for myself, and touch him with my own hands. A week later, Thomas gets his wish. Again, the disciples are gathered in the house with doors locked shut. This time Thomas is with them. Jesus comes to them, and once again says, "Peace be with you." To Thomas he says, "See my wounds, touch my wounds. Thomas gets all the proof he needs, dropping down to his knees and crying out, "My Lord and My God."

Then Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." In an instant, Thomas believes. Yet in that same instant, something else happens. The room suddenly gets very crowded, for with those words, spoken to Thomas, Jesus draws every follower of Jesus Christ into that room with him. For the words may have been spoken first to a disciple named Thomas. But they are also words spoken to you and me today, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Some two thousand years later, the events of the resurrection as told to us by Matthew, Luke and John, remain very much a mystery. We don't know what

really happened, or how the resurrection occurred. We have no first-hand knowledge. We do not see the resurrected Christ. We do not hear his voice. We do not see the wounds of his body. All we have is the testimony of the disciples who were the first hand witnesses; a story that has been handed down from one generation of believers to the next. Jesus, son of God, the Messiah, was raised by God from the dead so that all might experience peace and salvation. In many ways our lives and our generation can very much be summarized by that this story from the Gospel of John. We live in a world surrounded by information. Through newspapers, through radio, through television, and most recently through the internet, we can see and experience firsthand events happening anywhere on this planet. Our eyes and our ears and most certainly our minds are bombarded with an avalanche of information, too much for any human being to process at any given time.

And yet, even with all of this information, we are no less alone and no less frightened than those disciples in that room behind locked doors. We are no more at peace in our generation than those who lived generations ago in the time of Christ. We live in a world that has grown smaller and closer, yet we are no less afraid. For the most part, we are afraid of moving outside of the little boxes or locked rooms of our lives, afraid that by doing so we might lose what we have, not realizing that there is so much more to gain.

By entering into that room on those two separate occasions, Jesus invites his followers to step outside of that room. He challenges them to leave behind their fears, and embrace a new world. "Peace be with you," he says, "now go. Go tell of a new world, a world of peace, and share with them a story that has the power to save and unite all humanity. I have shared this story with you; now you must share this story with others.

You know, during this Easter season, we make the same mistake that Thomas does. We obsess about the body. We think that the true meaning of the resurrection is found in a body that can be seen and wounds that can be touched. But as Thomas discovered, the real power of the resurrection is not in the body. Jesus told his followers not to cling to his body. The real power of the resurrection lays in individuals whose lives that are transformed by their faith in the reality and the power of God's love. Those whose lives are transformed, who find their peace in God through Jesus Christ have the power to transform other lives. Together these transformed individuals have the power to transform neighborhoods, and communities and nations, and even the whole planet.

It all begins with the faith and the power of one. So ask yourself this morning. What are those things that you are most afraid of? What is it that keeps you behind the locked doors of your life and your mind, out of fear? Jesus has the power the break into our lives and transform us. Jesus comes to us in this place and invites us to step out into a new world; a world in which fear has no power. It

is a world in which we can truly enjoy peace. All you have to do is say, "I believe, and take those first steps out of those rooms of fear."

Jesus says, "Peace be with you." Let us give thanks to God for that peace.
AMEN!