

Easter Gifts

John 20:19-23

2nd Sunday of Easter

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Today's scripture is the second of three resurrection appearances in chapter 20 of the gospel of John. In the first story, just prior to this passage, early in the morning on Easter day Mary Magdalene was in the garden and became the first witness to see the risen Lord. She then shared what she had seen with the disciples.

The third resurrection appearance in this chapter, which follows right after today's reading, is to Thomas, who is absent in our story, but present when Christ appears again a week later, making the first confession of Christ as divine when he proclaims, "My Lord and my God."

¹⁹ *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."*

²⁰ *After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.*

²¹ *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

Fear paralyzed the disciples. For fear of the religious authorities, they hid away in a locked room. For fear of the ones who had perpetrated violence, they hid away in a locked room. For fear of the ones who had the power to bring death, they hid away in a locked room. For fear of the ones who had taken their hope, their love, their Lord, they hid away in a locked room.

It just makes sense. For fear of robbery, I may lock the doors to my house. For fear of people who are unkind, I may lock my heart. For fear of being exposed as imperfect, I may lock others out of who I really am. For fear of those with whom I disagree, I may lock my mind. For fear of those who have used power to commit violence, I may lock myself in with those who are my clan.

It is just common sense. Surely the disciples were just thinking, "Let's lay low until we figure out what happens. You can never be too careful. Sure Mary may have been bravely wandering in public in the garden where anyone could get to her. But she was just a woman, what did she have to lose?" Fear can paralyze, even when news of resurrection is in the air. We love our lives too much to foolishly lay them down. We each only get one: and it is precious. God knows this. For God gave us each the gift of this one, precious life.

So when the Risen One comes into their midst, Jesus does not condemn. Rather than berating them for their shortcomings, Christ offers them three gifts: Easter gifts, gifts that come now in this time of resurrection. Not chocolate or baskets or eggs. But to those for whom he died, God gives gifts of *peace*, *purpose*, and *presence* of the Spirit. And those three gifts transform the disciples' fear.

The Risen One offers the gift of *peace*. "Peace be with you," are his first words. And then, the scriptures proclaim, "He showed them his hands and his side." And the disciples rejoiced greatly when they saw the Lord. It is interesting that they are moved from fear to joy when they see the wounds that Christ bore from all he had been through. The peace that Christ offers is not a peace that is absence of violence or scarring or wounds - quite the contrary. It is the wounds that show

the story of how a life has been lived. But when the disciples see Jesus, they know that even when the world had thrown its worst at Christ - abandonment, violence, injury, betrayal, even death: a cursed, painful, horrible death – that the worst was not enough to overcome him. And for those of us who are with him and in him, and he in us, the church proclaims that is true for us as well. In the end we are assured that we will not be overcome: by powers and principalities of injustice or evil, by illness or violence, by abandonment or betrayal. Oh, we will be received by the world as our Lord was – we may be hurt and even killed. But that was not the end of Christ, and it is not the end of us. In place of fear, Christ offers the gift of peace, a deep peace from Christ who has overcome all.

The Risen One also offers the gift of *purpose*. “As the Father sends me, so I send you.” Theologian Frances Taylor Gench reminds us that throughout the gospel of John, “Jesus so mirrors God that people who encounter Christ are forced to make a decision, what will their response be to the revelation of God in Christ: belief or unbelief?” (*Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, p. 135) In the same way we are called to represent Christ, to *re-present* Christ. As individuals and as a community we are called to comfort those who are hurting, work for justice, act in kindness, sow seeds of life in the face of death, welcome all to a new community where we know each other and allow ourselves to be known. And we give of ourselves for the sake of greater wholeness, hope and life. Our purpose is presenting Christ ever anew. In place of fear, which looks to the past and leads to a trapped present; we are gifted with purpose, which begins in the present reality of resurrection and compels us to the fullness of the time to come.

Finally, the Risen One offers the gift of the *presence* of the Holy Spirit, “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Unlike the account in the book of Acts, which separates Pentecost from Easter by fifty days, John presents the coming of the Holy Spirit as an integral part of the gift of his resurrection. As God breathed life into Adam at the creation of the world, so here Christ breathes Spirit, wind, life, into the fearful disciples. Breath seems so simple, natural – almost forgettable. And yet experts tell us that most of the time we don’t breathe the way we should; we take shallow breaths that barely sustain us. But when we, as a yoga teacher might say, tap into our breath, we can imagine that we are being filled with God’s life-giving Spirit. In times of stress, conflict or anxiety, we know that taking a few deep breaths can help us to avoid overreacting in ways that escalate the situation. That is not exactly the Holy Spirit, but it kind of is: God immediately available to each of us – as close as our own breath – at any time in any place – to renew and refresh and restore. Christ gifts us with the Holy Spirit, and when we are filled with Holy Spirit, fear can find nowhere within us to dwell.

So my fellow disciples, on this day of Resurrection, let us claim our three Easter gifts: the gift of *peace*, that Christ has overcome the world; the gift of *purpose*, to present Christ ever anew; the gift of the *presence* of the Holy Spirit, as close as our own breath. Holding on to, and being held by those gifts, unafraid of what lies before us, let us move beyond any locked doors, to share and bear the gifts of the resurrection with the whole world.

Christ is risen; Christ is risen indeed. Christ is risen; Christ is risen indeed. Christ, is risen; Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.