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### Expiration Dates

John 20:19-23

One of the gifts in my life is those little freshness dates printed on food items. You know what I mean. You can find them on milk cartons, meat products and many other items. It is a guide for purchasing products and you for sure do not want to buy the product after the date stamped. However, once you have purchased the product, the dates are there to remind you about the length of time the product is actually good.

Now, as we become better acquainted, you will find that I am not very domestic. Though I have good intentions, occasionally I get behind on cleaning out the refrigerator. Because of that, we have a long held rule in our house, "Check the expiration date before you eat anything from the refrigerator and if it looks like a science project, throw it away." Expiration dates--they are a life-saver at my house. They set the limits that help to keep my family safe. Like you, we rely on a variety of measures in life to keep us safe and to limit our exposure to danger. Playing it safe makes sense to me, and yet...we are the people of Easter, we are the people of the Resurrection.

### Prayer

It has been a week since Easter for us, but according to the passage I just read from the Gospel of John, the disciples are gathered together on the night of Easter. The Resurrection story is not exactly the same in the four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In the Gospel of John, Jesus shows himself to one woman on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene. It is Mary Magdalene who races to tell the disciples the news that Jesus could not be contained by the tomb. That very evening, the disciples, or at least most of them, were gathered together.

They were a pitiful bunch that night. They were scared. Jesus had already been crucified, and they, the beloved followers of Jesus, had run for their lives. They walked away from Jesus. They denied Jesus. They betrayed Jesus. And now, it was too late. Jesus is dead. Jesus is gone. There is no possibility of changing that course of events. There is no chance of turning back, of sharing an apology, of stepping up for Jesus. No, now on that Easter evening, the disciples are huddled together, frightened, grieving, ashamed of their behavior and completely demoralized. Their leader is dead and according to Mary Magdalene his body is missing. What next?

To these discouraged followers of Jesus, locked in a room, praying in hopes of just staying alive, Jesus appears. He offers to them nothing of what they deserve. He does not go through the litany of their failures, he does not ridicule them or belittle them for their betrayal, no, this Jesus, this man of grace, offers them blessing by saying, "Peace be with

you.” Jesus offers the very thing the disciples needed the most, words of absolution, salve for their soul. Jesus gives the disciples an anointing of peace.

Realizing that this is Jesus, the disciples are filled with joy. All is forgiven. In his death and resurrection, new life is offered; a new beginning becomes their reality. All was lost and now all is blessed. Theirs is a joy rooted in Jesus’ grace.

With a divine breath, Jesus sends his beloved friends, his disciples, out into the world to continue his ministry by the power of the Holy Spirit. The breath of God is with them as they live forward in ministry.

The way I read it, the disciples are called to ministry by Jesus a second time. Having failed miserably the first time, Jesus goes right back to them and not only calls them a second time, but empowers them with holiness to go into the world as agents of forgiveness.

For me, the power of the Resurrection is that it removes our expiration date. We are no longer limited in life or limited by death. Through the grace of Christ, that which was limited, that which was temporal, becomes eternal and limitless. We are not called to play it safe, we are called to allow the love of Christ to transform our living, to step up and speak out with and for the people of this world that are crying out for justice, for compassion and for grace.

Far too much of the Christian community has spent the bulk of life after the Resurrection playing it safe as if we continue to carry an expiration date. Energy for the Kingdom of God has been spent focusing on the negatives of human nature, underscoring the old limitations of humanity and suppressing the grace that Christ has already offered. All too often, we behave like the disciples--afraid and hiding.

In his book entitled, *“A Generous Orthodoxy,”* author Brian McLaren writes, “God is a brokenhearted Parent when we squander our birthright and leave our proper spiritual home.” Our spiritual home is God’s grace, our birthright is forgiveness, not because we deserve it, but like the disciples, because Jesus ordains it.

The breath of God is still upon us. No matter what we have or have not done for Christ lately, today is the perfect opportunity to embrace our second chance, our calling of the resurrection. We tend to restrict the resurrection to an Easter morning celebration, however, Easter is a mindset, an experience that transcends time and place. Jesus lives and he calls us to life in abundance. His disciples continued to experience his presence after his death and in so doing, were able to step forward into their future with the power of the Holy Spirit. The spirit of Christ remains with us as well.

I love my hairstylist. I love her because she is family. She is my adorable niece. I love her because she is young, bright, creative and compassionate. I may not always love the way I do my hair, but the stylist, I love all day every day. I went to see her one evening last week and she handed me one of her new business cards. It has her name on it of course, it has

some of the services she offers--cut, color, extensions, make-up, etc.--and then in tiny print she has these words, "transformation artist."

What a great concept. It speaks to me this first Sunday after Easter. Christ stands before each one of us, calling us again, offering us yet another chance to follow. He breathes the Spirit of God upon us and asks us to go into the world in his name as transformation artists. He calls us to be agents of forgiveness. As agents of Christ we are called to share forgiveness and to live gracefully and as we do just that, we become transformation artists.

The disciples had choices. They could remain in hiding, they could go back home and play it safe or they could receive the power of the Holy Spirit and become agents of transformation in the name of Jesus Christ. Transformational change did not come easily. Transformational change involves a death and resurrection. Transformational change requires letting go of what has been to embrace what can be.

We are the people of Easter, and on this first Sunday we are given another chance to choose to be a part of transformational living!

What would it take for you, for me to become agents of transformation, transformation artists?

The disciples created community again and began to imagine how to adjust to the physical absence of their leader. They committed anew to the principles of Jesus' teachings. They decide to embrace Jesus' vision of grace for them and planned their next steps in ministry. Finally, they leaned into the Holy Spirit, the divine breath of God, and began their ministry in Christ's name.

These men who were scared, hiding, and demoralized captured a new vision for life. They resolve to leave behind their fear and their sense of limitation and to pursue the vision of grace. They stepped into the new vision and began living into that new reality.

Becoming agents of transformation, becoming transformation artists takes intention and determination. It means releasing the fear that holds us back and embracing the vision of Christ to power us forward.

Katherine Commale and her mother, Lynda, caught a vision of grace recently when they heard about a United Methodist initiative concerning malaria. A donation of \$10.00 covers the cost of one insecticide bed net. The net can protect a family of four from malaria-carrying mosquitoes for four years. The campaign itself is called "Nothing but Nets." The reason I mention Katherine and Lynda, is that they began a campaign to raise funds for this project. Between last Labor Day and Christmas, they raised \$10,000.00 to fight malaria through "Nothing But Nets." Obviously, this has been a tremendous undertaking. Clearly, they could have limited their involvement at \$100 or \$1,000. But they are transformational artists! They did not limit themselves, they just kept on dreaming and planning and coming up with

more ideas to support this project. Imagine the thousands of people who will benefit from their vision and their actions.

Transformation comes in many ways. The presence of Christ is still with us. When we realize that our expiration date is a thing of the past and that with God we are limitless, we are released to catch the vision of grace and allow that vision to take root in our lives. I have read that it takes a minimum of three weeks to learn a new behavior. In that time the old pattern of behavior holds less power, and the new behavior begins to take hold. Death and Resurrection. New life, new hope, new behavior, new vision – all gifts of the Resurrection – all gifts of the grace of Jesus Christ.

Scripture tells us that the disciples left that locked room and went back out into the world. They went about ministry in a variety of ways, each adding their own ministry to the vision of grace. What is that vision for you? What is your response to the new life offered to you through the Resurrection of Christ? You have no expiration date! Your life and my life have no end. We live in grace here and now and in life beyond this life. Yet, this is our moment in time, our time for a second chance, our time to respond to new life in Christ.

This has been a week when we were graphically reminded that tension between races and genders continues to harm our society. You may catch a vision of grace that involves you in ministry to ease these tensions. Like Katherine Commale, you might catch a vision of grace that fights malaria in the world. Catch a vision of grace and participate in ministry with Habitat for Humanity, or tutoring children, or teaching English as a second language. New life comes from new vision. Christ holds a new vision for you and your life. Take a step into that vision today and begin to live it out as the people of Easter!

I have been playing it a little too safe these days. I think I have been hanging onto the backside of the cross where life is full of limitations and expiration dates. This afternoon, I plan to step into a new vision of grace. I have not been heavily involved in community or world issues since coming to Indianapolis. However, I have a long history of being involved in social issues. I guess I have been taking a little break. But, this afternoon, I will join many others at the State House for a gathering concerning Darfur. I know that my involvement will not save the world or change the situation there, but it is a step. It is one step into a new vision of grace in my life. For me it is a ministry of the Resurrection. What is your next step?

I close with my favorite words of a retired Episcopal Bishop, John Shelby Spong who writes, "So, let us live brothers and sisters. Let us eat, drink and be merry, not because tomorrow we shall die, but because today we live and it is our vocation to be alive – to be alive to God, alive to each other, alive to ourselves." No expiration dates here at Meridian Street, only life, life in abundance, life as the disciples of Jesus Christ, the people of Easter.