

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Rev. Claire George-Drumheller
John 20:19-23
Second Sunday of Easter
April 8, 2018

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 Jews, 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."

John 20:19-23 (NRSV)

I've been noticing walls lately. In the things I'm seeing, the things I'm reading, and the things I'm watching, I've noticed an abundance of walls, fences, borders – structures that are intended to separate one group from another.

A couple weeks ago I read a novel about a young girl in East Berlin who dug a tunnel to try to join her father and brother in West Germany (*A Night Divided*, Jennifer Nielsen). This week I finished an audiobook about a young girl who moves to Alaska with her family. Her dad is a "doomsday prepper," waiting for and preparing for whatever catastrophe will end civilization. In the height of his anxiety, he builds a solid wooden fence – a wall – around their family compound (*The Great Alone*, Kristin Hannah). I'm listening to a podcast about men who live inside walls; it's called "Ear Hustle," a podcast hosted, edited, and produced by men who are incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison. One of my favorite podcasts did an entire episode in March all about walls. They featured the argument on if there is a boundary wall at the DMZ and North Korea and told about the 650-foot border wall between Norway and Russia ("Walls," *This American Life*. March 16, 2018).

I've been noticing an abundance of walls lately. I think I'm tuned in to these boundaries, walls, dividers, barriers, because of our recent trip to San Diego and Tijuana. Over Davidson spring break, Robert Alexander and I went with a group of Davidson students and 2 pastors from the Methodist church to the US/Mexico border to immerse ourselves in the human story of immigration. So much of life in San Diego and Tijuana is defined by a physical wall – a fourteen-mile long wall that separates the United States from Mexico. What I didn't understand until I saw it myself, it's not even *a* wall; there are two walls: a primary wall and a secondary fence. And in some places along this part of the border, there are even three walls.

I'm not going to tell you too much about our trip to San Diego and Tijuana because, if you'll allow a quick promotion, our students will give a presentation so you can hear all about the stories we heard and the people we met. Join us on Wednesday, April 18 at 6:30pm in the Congregation House. Session is even beginning a little later that night so elders can come. You are all invited to Wednesday Night Live dinner and then to stay for the students' presentation. April 18. See you then.

I won't tell you too much about our experience now, but it has made me notice walls – barriers and boundaries that are built up to separate, divide, and distance one from another. And wouldn't you know, in today's gospel passage, I noticed a wall, a wall put up by the disciples.

Jesus had been crucified on Friday. Early Sunday morning, according to John's account, Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the beloved disciple encounter an empty tomb, but they don't quite know what it means. Mary Magdalene sees the risen Lord and tells the disciples, but they still don't understand. They go on home, and scripture says they locked the doors to their house "for fear of the Jews" (v. 19). The disciples have every right to be afraid; their fear is realistic. They had just witnessed their religious authorities and the Roman Empire work together to kill Jesus¹; the disciples have every reason to suspect that they are next on the execution list. They see the empty tomb, they are a bit confused, and they go home and lock the doors. They create a sort of wall – a barrier; their locked door separates the disciples and the outside world. They lock the doors, hoping this wall will keep the vulnerable disciples safe. They hope the locked door will separate these leaderless disciples and the religious powers that killed their leader; they hope these locked doors will keep the ones on the inside safe.

The disciples have put up a wall around themselves to protect themselves. And it is through this wall—this locked door—that Jesus enters. Locked doors cannot keep out the resurrected Christ. Walls are not barriers to our savior. A locked door is no obstacle to the risen Lord.

Jesus enters the room where the disciples gather, somehow entering a house that is locked up tight. Jesus enters a room filled tension, fear, and anxiety. The risen Lord, in his earthly body with physical wounds, somehow passes through a locked door—through a sort of wall—and offers these words to the disciples: "Peace be with you" (v. 19). Jesus shows them the wounds on his body, proves that it really is him, and then speaks for a second time: "Peace be with you" (v. 21). The first thing the risen Christ says to his disciples is a word of peace; the second thing the risen Christ says to his disciples is to repeat that same word of peace.

The Greek word for *peace* is a common greeting – a way of saying "hello." But when Jesus utters the word *peace*, it carries the connotation of *shalom*.² We translate the word *shalom* into "peace" in English, but we miss some of the meaning in translation. *Peace* may make us think of the hand gesture or the peace sign or Lennon's song "Give Peace a Chance." *Peace* is commonly understood as the absence of conflict—*peace* as the presence of quiet and rest or *peace* as when everyone agrees and gets along. This Western, American concept of *peace* is not what Jesus said when he greeted his disciples.³

Jesus offers the disciples *peace*, shows the disciples his wounds, and then offers *peace* once more. The *shalom* being offered comes from the risen Lord; *peace* is offered by someone who was killed for his peacemaking efforts: Jesus was executed for his work of reconciliation and renewal.⁴ The *shalom* is offered by someone who knew violence personally; the *shalom* Jesus offers has nothing to do with tranquility, harmony, or affability.⁵

Jesus doesn't offer the American concept of *peace*, but Jewish *shalom*. The Hebrew root of *shalom* means wholeness or well-being. *Shalom* in the Hebrew Bible is found in parallel with *righteousness* (e.g., Ps. 85:10, Zech. 8:16, 19; Isa. 32:17); there can be no peace without right-living.⁶ *Shalom* is not a negative concept; *shalom* is not the absence of violence or the absence of war or the absence of fighting. Rather, *shalom* is a positive notion; *shalom* is the presence of wholeness, health, completeness.⁷

The peace that Jesus offers is *shalom*, a notion of wholeness offered to a room of terrified disciples. Jesus offers *shalom*, a gift of health to followers who have seen their leader killed and fear their own lives are next on the execution list. Jesus offers *shalom*, a blessing of completeness to a people who have locked the doors, shutting out the outside world. However, the disciples learn that even a locked door cannot keep out the peace of Christ.

On our Border Immersion Trip, we were allowed to enter the space between the two border fences. There's a park that is open for four hours on Saturday and four hours on Sunday. Ten people are allowed in the park at a time, and the US border patrol agent allowed our group to enter, three people at a time, for only a few minutes. There, I witnessed a peace—a *shalom*—that cannot be stopped by a

wall, by a barricade, by a fence, by a locked door. Family members will travel hundreds of miles from either side of the border wall to meet at this park on the weekends. The only openings on the primary wall are about as big as an adult pinky; the openings are so small, I had to put my eye right up to the wall to see the other side.

There's a practice at this primary wall called the *besito de meñique*, or "pinky kiss." People on either side of the border wall place their pinkies up to the openings in the metal for a pinky kiss. Families and friends reunite at this wall and strangers become friends. The reunions and the unions are sealed with this pinky kiss—a kind of accommodating embrace at a wall that prevents intimacy.

Even before we went on our trip, the Border Immersion group ended our weekly meetings by passing the peace of Christ. We made our way around the room and hugged each other with the traditional words of "may the peace of Christ be with you." After our experience at the border wall, it became our practice to pass the peace of Christ with the *besito de meñique*—with a pinky kiss. It reminds us that the walls we build and the doors we lock cannot keep out the *shalom* of Christ.

Our risen Lord offered *shalom—peace*—to a room full of bewildered, doubting, fearful followers. "Peace be with you," he said. He showed the disciples the wounds on his resurrected body and said again, "Peace be with you." Jesus is resurrected proof that is not easy to be a peacemaker in the world—not then, not today, not ever. It is easier to lock ourselves away; it is easier to lock the door for fear of the world's dangers. It is easier to hide from the injustices of the world; it is easier not to say anything for fear of offending a neighbor or a family member; it is easier to live as if Jesus has been crucified and his body is still in the tomb, as if that's the end of the story. But we are Easter people; we know the tomb is never the end of the story, and we know the easy way is not the mission of the church. The second time Jesus offers peace, he says this: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (v. 21). The peace that Christ offers cannot be stopped by locked doors, but then it cannot be selfishly locked away either. The peace Christ offers his disciples also pushes us from behind the closed door and into the world. The peace of Christ and the commissioning of disciples are linked.

Jesus' work for peace and reconciliation got him killed. Jesus had a radical vision of the kingdom of God here on earth—a vision where walls are torn down between Jews and Samaritans and prostitutes and Pharisees. Jesus' radical vision of the Kingdom of God put him in conflict with the powers that be. Jesus comes to offer his disciples *peace*, but then to send them out, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, to continue his work of *shalom—peace*, reconciliation, and renewal.⁸

This week was the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—a man who worked for wholeness, completeness, *shalom*; a man who worked to tear down walls that Jim Crow put up; a man who had a glimpse of that radical kingdom of God and who worked to make it a reality. As a nation, we hold King in high regard today and admire him greatly; but he was not assassinated fifty years ago because of deep admiration. At the time of his death, even some long-time supporters distanced themselves from King because of his words about the Vietnam War and his Poor People's Campaign. A Gallup poll taken two years before he was killed showed widespread disapproval of King's work—widespread disapproval of King's peacemaking, widespread disapproval of King's tearing down walls.⁹ Thankfully, years of hindsight have helped us to recognize the faithful work of Dr. King. Thankfully, we recognize Dr. King for the brave and faithful leader that he was. However, hindsight has also helped us forget how hard his work was. Tearing down walls is not easy; peacemaking is not easy—not then, not today, not ever.

Jesus breaks through a locked door—through a kind of wall—to offer peace and then sends the disciples out to break down more walls: walls between the first and last, walls between blessed and cursed, walls between rich and poor. Jesus comes to us just as he came to those first disciples, right in the midst of our fear, pain, doubt, and confusion.¹⁰ Jesus comes offering us peace—*shalom*—and sends us out to continue God's work—to tear down walls, to build up God's kingdom. May we have the courage and the faith to do so.

¹ Johnson, E. Elizabeth, "Pastoral Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, Vol. 2, eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2015), 320-325.

² *Ibid.*

³ Largen, Kristin Johnston, "Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, Vol. 2, eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2015), 320-325.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Dewey, Joanna, "Peace" in *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier. San Francisco: Harper (1996), 823-824.

⁷ "Peace" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, ed. David Noel Freedman. New York City: Doubleday (1992), 206-212.

⁸ Largen, *Feasting on the Gospels*

⁹ "Assessing MLK, 50 Years after Assassination." *Charlotte Talks*. Podcast audio, April 4, 2018.

<http://wfae.org/post/charlotte-talks-assessing-mlk-50-years-after-assassination#stream/0>

¹⁰ Johnson, Elisabeth. "Commentary on John 20:19-31," *Working Preacher*. April 2014.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1991