

Peace Be With You

TEXT:
I Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

March 30, 2008

Clergy have long-called this day, the first Sunday after Easter: “Low Sunday.” That’s because we can always count on a low attendance compared to Easter. Wasn’t it glorious then – a full sanctuary, the bells, the choir and orchestra - for both services! So we thank each of you for coming out today and helping to ease our “low Sunday let down.”

Not so long ago, there was another time sanctuaries across the country were packed. Do you remember? It was the Sunday following September 11th. People flocked to worship services, not because of some obligation, but because they turned to religion to help make sense of the confusion, the shock, and the pain. People were desperate for an explanation to the death and destruction that struck New York, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania. They needed consolation. And it seemed for a moment that a kind of spiritual awakening had come to America. But our sanctuaries didn’t stay full for long.

At the same time, our world has never been the same - it is more fragile than ever, and we seem to be more fearful people than ever. Daily, the headlines play on these fears: Oil Prices Continue to Escalate; War rages, Natural Disasters Abound, the Climate is Changing, the Economy is Stalled, the Health Care System Is in Crisis. And

even in Lawrence, the number of homeless and hungry people grows as the resources to help them shrink.

These are not calm and tranquil times. In our text from the Gospel of John today, we find the disciples also living in anxious times. The story begins on that night – after Mary Magdalene had claimed to have seen the risen Jesus, and to have talked with him. The disciples had gathered together, not to celebrate this good news, but to hide by cover of night - behind locked doors, in a secret meeting. They were filled with fear, knowing that those who executed Jesus might come after them next.

Only a few days earlier, they had watched Jesus die. And they knew too well their own failure to stand with him to the end. They didn’t know what to think about it all - but the guilt, the fear, the confusion, the doubt, the loss of hope, hung heavy in the air. How could they possibly believe he was alive again? So, they just waited...

Suddenly there he was, transcending all their boundaries, to be with them again. His first words are simple, “Peace be with you.” He doesn’t demand that they be joyful; he doesn’t scold for deserting him in his greatest time of need. Rather, in the midst of their fear and doubt, he greets them with the gift of peace.

He had told them of his peace before, just days earlier, when they were gathered in the upper room before his arrest:

“Peace I leave with you,” he said, “My peace I give to you, not as the world gives, do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Believe in God, believe also in me.” (John 14)

For his gift was God’s peace, the Shalom of the Hebrew scriptures. It wasn’t the world’s peace, it wasn’t a false promise of security or an end to all conflict. Rather, Jesus promises well-being, an inner strength, a confidence – if they can trust and believe in him – this peace will empower them to face all the difficulties and persecution that lay ahead, with the strength of God’s presence, always with them.

And then, as if to reinforce the point, he shows them his wounds – the marks of rejection, torture, and death. For such is the mystery of God’s love; even God’s great victory over death did not get rid of the wounds. Even after Easter, Christ still has scars....

Perhaps this was the best way he could help them understand. Perhaps, as one preacher suggests, Jesus was saying:

“You don’t have to banish your own wounds when we are together... I understand what it’s like to hurt. But that pain and hurt no longer have dominion over me. Remember

how I told you I had to suffer—and as my followers, you will face trials too – But this pain, and even death, has now lost its power over me, and over those who believe in me.” (George Hartwell)

They could see that Jesus lived, despite the worst that could happen. This was powerful stuff, something that had to be mullied over. Because I suppose that the disciples are a bit like us – that somewhere along the line, they and we have picked up a message that goes something like this: “If we just believe, if we just trust in God enough, then God will bless us with a turmoil-free existence.” So when trouble and turmoil come, it can be quite a struggle. Yet there’s nothing in the Bible – anywhere – that ever promises us a stress-free life.

And by the time Jesus came to the disciples in that locked room, they knew too well that the world was a dangerous and precarious place.

Garrison Keilor had a recent column about the state of his faith, as he went to church during Lent. He writes:

“I came to church as a pagan this year though wearing a Christian suit and white shirt, and sat in a rear pew with my sandy-haired, gap-toothed daughter whom I would like to see grow up in the love the Lord...and there I was, a skeptic in the henhouse, thinking weaselish thoughts.

“THIS OFTEN HAPPENS AROUND EASTER,” he observes. “God, in His humorous way, sometimes schedules high holy days for a time when your faith is at low tide, a mud flat strewn with newspapers and children’s

beach toys, and while everyone else is all joyful and shiny among the lilies and praising up a storm, there YOU are, snarfling and grumbling. Which happened to me this year.”

And so, during OUR high holy days (or Low Sunday as the case may be), at a time when our world and our lives are anything but calm and serene, the story of Jesus’ peace is scheduled in the Lectionary. When the fearful disciples saw Jesus’ hands and his side, they knew it really was him, and they rejoiced. For what Jesus knew is that wounded people need healing, not additional bruises.

(Virgil Elizondo, p. 49 of *Walking With God in a Fragile World*)

The famous preacher and peace activist who died several years ago, William Sloane Coffin, said once at a Holy Week service:

“As I see it, the primary religious task these days is to try to think straight...You can’t think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. If your heart’s a stone, you can’t have decent thoughts – either about personal relations or about international ones.

A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.”

Jesus knew that if the disciples remained paralyzed by fear, they would never understand the truth of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. If they remained stuck in doubt, they would never think straight. They would never see clearly if their vision was clouded with confusion. Of they were so focused on their own distress and anxiety, then they would never live with the sustaining

hope that one day, all will be well because God will reign eternal.

And if they had hearts of stone, he knew they could never leave the darkness or safety of that locked room and go out into the world. So he says it again: “Peace be with you.”

And then he commissions them: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And breathed on them, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

The disciples had work to do – to go out into the world as his witnesses - to be the body of Christ, to go into the midst of the suffering and pain, just as Jesus had, to carry his peace to those in need – to do the work of forgiveness in a world God loves. For they will never be left alone, or be powerless. They are given the Holy Spirit; God’s love will sustain them and uphold them – no matter what lay ahead.

Now a week later, there they were again, in the safety of that same house, perhaps not quite ready to go out and face the authorities. Only this time, Thomas is with them, and he too has an opportunity to see Jesus and his wounds. He then makes the most powerful confession in John’s gospel, by saying, “My Lord and My God!”

And it is time for the disciples to return to Galilee.

After 9-11 passed, the crowds did not continue to flock to church. Perhaps they came in the first place, hoping to hear that God will take away all the distress and pain and fear of their lives – but the message

following a disaster of that magnitude is not so simple. Rather, our times seem to confirm again and again that tribulation, anxiety, or trouble is more the reality of life. **The issue is not that such things exist in our lives, but how faithful people deal with them.**

It seems to me that this story from John's gospel is a gift to us, on this low Sunday following the high of Easter, for it reminds us that when we are afraid, when we just want to hide out from all the troubles of this world, when we have put up walls and locked the doors, THAT is when Jesus comes to us - in the midst of our fears, with the healing words: "Peace be with you."

And then, just as God sent Jesus, God sends US out, into the world, with the breath of the Holy Spirit upon us.

Thanks be to God!

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