

April 7th Rev Jo Smith

Think again of what it would have been like for those first disciples, gathered together in the upper room that first Easter evening, which is when today's gospel reading begins. Think of what they witnessed in the days leading up to Easter: There was that emotional Thursday evening, when Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and shared a last supper with them. There was his agony in the garden, when those same disciples fell asleep as Jesus prayed. There was the betrayal by one of their own, Judas, and Jesus' arrest. The denial by Peter, the crowds shouting for Jesus to be crucified. His trial, his torture, and then, finally, his crucifixion. His burial in the tomb.

And now, two days later, these stories from the woman who went to visit the tomb, that the tomb was empty, and Jesus was raised from the dead. Just imagine the swirl of emotions those disciples must have been feeling when Jesus came and stood among them that evening! They felt joy, of course. But also sadness over what Jesus went through. And confusion over what his resurrection meant. And fear; we know that they were very afraid. And, I strongly suspect, they felt guilt, too, over deserting Jesus, in his hour of need. And in response to all of that joy and sadness and confusion and fear and guilt, Jesus simply said:

Peace Be with You

What Jesus did on that first Easter evening was to show those frightened disciples the same grace and mercy and forgiveness and love that he always showed. He came and stood among them and simply said, "Peace be with you." And then, to ease their doubts, he showed them his hands and his side. No wonder the disciples rejoiced to see him! Not only was

Jesus alive and among them, he had also forgiven them for all that they had done – and not done – over these last dramatic days.

We often read today's gospel reading and focus on Thomas, the doubting disciple who needed to put his finger in the marks of the nails before he would believe. But this story is really about all of those fear-filled disciples, trembling behind that locked door, and wondering what it all means. This story is really about each and every one of us: trying to live a life worthy of our Lord and Savior; struggling with doubt, weighed down with fear, and constantly falling short of what we know that he expects from us.

And this story is also about how Jesus comes to us, in the midst of our doubts and fears and sin and guilt, to offer each and every one of us that simple word of grace, and mercy, and forgiveness. "Peace be with you," says our risen Lord to us all. This gospel reading is really about the peace which surpasses all understanding; the peace which the world cannot give; the peace that can only come from our crucified and risen Lord; and the peace that comes when we most need it.

Think back to a time in your life when you feel as though you have truly disappointed God. And now, imagine Jesus showing up at that very moment, and saying to you: "Peace be with you." That is what our Lord does for each and every one of us. That, too, is what the miracle of Easter means for us.

But today's gospel reading is also about the ways in which we are called to share that peace and that joy, with a world so filled with doubt and fear. Jesus did not join his disciples in the upper room simply to celebrate his resurrection with them. He also joined them there to give them the gift of

the Holy Spirit, and to send them to the world to continue his mission. “As the Father has sent me,” Jesus said to them and to us, “so I send you.” The word “Apostle” literally means one who is sent. The word “Disciple,” on the other hand, literally means one who learns. The disciples have learned from Jesus many things. By his words and his example, he has taught them about the Kingdom of God, and about our Heavenly Father’s purpose for them and for the world. Now, these disciples are becoming apostles. Disciples who are sent into the world. Jesus sends those first disciples out into the world to be his apostles. And he sends us out into the world in the same way. We are all apostles, members of the apostolic church. We are the sent-out people of God, with a mission that comes straight from our crucified and risen Messiah.

### Receive the Holy Spirit

But Jesus doesn’t just tell us to do this. He helps us to do this. That, too, is the miracle of the resurrection. After he said to those first apostles, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” Jesus breathed on those apostles, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

When Jesus breathed on them, I can almost imagine those disciples thinking back to the creation story in Genesis: when God took dust from the ground, formed Adam from the dust, and then breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. As the Father did at the beginning, so the Son did to those first disciples. And so the Spirit does to us in our baptisms: When we are made new creations in Christ; No longer merely dust which will return to dust when we die. We are now brothers and sisters in Christ, who will live forever with our crucified and risen Lord.

In our baptisms, we are given the new life of the risen Christ right away. This new life doesn't begin in heaven. It begins here on earth, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, given to us in our baptisms. You see, it is not enough for Jesus that he conquered death through the great triumph of Easter. Now he wants to breathe this new life into you and I; he wants to share that new life with us. And then? Then he wants us to go out and share that new life with others. To share that new life with a world that is suffocated by anxiety and fear. He wants to breathe new life into this world through us. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Jesus wants us to go into a world in the grip of death, and breathe into it new life. And our world needs that new life, doesn't it? And if we wonder where it will come from, it will come from us. We are the ones continuing Jesus' mission. We are now the body of Christ in the world. We are God's plan to bring new life into a dying world, until the day that God's son returns again. Our words, our deeds, our hope, our faith, our love, our witness in our daily lives, our acts of love to others; all of this done in Jesus' name with the help of the Holy Spirit; all this is how the world catches a glimpse of our risen Lord. That is what it means to be an apostle, and that is what we are.

So that's what those first apostles did, right? They ran out and shared their joy with the world, right? Well, not exactly, not right away. A week after this story takes place, the first Sunday after Easter, we find those disciples back in the upper room; the door locked again. Has anything changed? Jesus shows up again, and this time he's upset, right? This time, he's going to give them a pep-talk, and tell them to get out there and do what he asked, right?

Well, no. The first thing he says when he shows up this time is – surprise, surprise – “Peace be with you.” Then, he turns to Thomas. Now, Thomas was not there a week ago, when Jesus first appeared to the other disciples. We are not sure why, but I’ve always wondered if Thomas was the only one brave enough to leave that upper room to go and get some food for everyone. But, at any rate, when the others told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, Thomas famously said, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

So, what does Jesus do when he appears to Thomas? Again, Jesus shows patience and forgiveness and mercy. He said to Thomas, “Put your fingers here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

What patience Jesus has – not only with Thomas, but with all the disciples! What patience he has with you and me.

Again and again, in the midst of our doubts and fears, and in the midst of our sin and failings, our crucified and risen Lord and Savior comes to us and says: “Peace be with you.” Again and again, he comes to us and says, “Do not doubt, but believe.” Again and again, Jesus forgives us, breathes new life into us, and offers us the gift of new life in Christ, and the promise of the Holy Spirit.

And again and again, our risen Lord reminds us of our mission; to go and share the peace and the joy and the hope of this new life, with our world that struggles to find peace, joy or hope. Again and again, the risen Jesus comes to us. To give us peace, to give us new life, to forgive our sin, and to gently remind us not to doubt but to believe. And again and again, he

invites us to go. To go in peace, to serve our risen Lord. Thanks be to God.  
Amen.