

Sermon on Sunday 12 April by Rev. Scott Martin

Gospel Reading: John 20 19 -end

Picture the scene! It is the evening of the first Easter day. The writer of the Gospel according to John, tells us that the disciples were gathered behind locked doors. The atmosphere was one of failure and fear. Their hopes had been shattered, they were exhausted and their courage had been completely drained. What now? What next? Their futures were uncertain, and not only were they hiding from the world, but they were also probably even hiding from themselves; how could they have been so foolish; the man they had been following, in whom they had placed their hopes, was dead. A yawning chasm of numbness and failure stood before them. There was no exit strategy, no plan B, no cleverly designed solution waiting in the wings; just the raw, savage blankness of merciless defeat staring them coldly in the face.

And it is into that room, into the depths of the disciples' fear and desperation that Jesus comes. He appears not with a rebuke for failing to trust, not with a scolding lecture, not with a demand for explanations or a passive aggressive sense of betrayal. He comes with a gift! A gift in the form of the words "peace be with you". Christ brings his gift into the **locked room**. The disciples in their fear had locked the doors, but they could not lock out Christ. That is good news for anyone who has ever felt trapped or overwhelmed by anxiety, grief, guilt or uncertainty. In many ways we all have our upper rooms into which we retreat when life begins to overwhelm us. But the reassuring thing for the disciples and for us, is that Jesus doesn't wait until we have "pulled ourselves together", he doesn't wait for a brave face, he meets us where and as we are. By being raised from the dead, Jesus not only leaves the tomb, not only conquers sin and death with love and life, but also enters the very depths of our fears, with the gift of **himself**, "peace be with you".

The "peace be with you" that Jesus brings, is not an offering of momentary calm or even a comforting slogan. His peace is his presence, not an escape. He offers Himself. Therefore, his peace is not the absence of trouble or fear, but is his presence as the Risen Lord, within the midst of it all.

In the resurrection account in John's Gospel, which we listened to earlier, Jesus shows the disciples the wounds in his hands and his side. The peace

he gives is not naïve or sentimental. On the contrary, it is a peace that has passed through suffering, a peace that knows the cost of love, a peace that carries scars. The reassuring presence of the risen Christ is one that has known suffering and therefore completely identifies with our own broken and fragile human predicament. Christian peace is not denial; it is resurrection.

The presence of Christ within the midst of the fearful disciples, is a way of reassuring them not to stay in hiding, but to be sent into the world. Jesus breathes on them and says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Therefore, the disciples move from fear to mission. Resurrection is not a private comfort; it is a public calling. In breathing on them, the breath of Jesus echoes the breath of God in Genesis, breathing life into humanity. It also echoes Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones, where breath brings hope to what seemed dead. Here, Jesus breathes new creation into his followers, they are not simply comforted – they are commissioned. The Church is born not in worldly triumph, but in a locked room, among frightened people who are suddenly filled with the Spirit.

And of course, our Gospel for today wouldn’t be complete without mentioning Thomas and his grace to have honest doubt. Thomas is not present for the first encounter with the risen Christ, and he refuses to accept second-hand faith. Quite understandably, he wants to see for himself. Thomas has often been called “Doubting Thomas”, but perhaps he is really “human Thomas”. When Jesus does finally appear to him, he doesn’t shame him. He meets Thomas in his questions, just in the same way that he met the other disciples in their fear. By inviting Thomas to come into physical contact with his crucifixion wounds, Jesus doesn’t invite Thomas to pass a test of faith; no, on a deeper level, Thomas is invited to receive a new way of relating to Christ, to know him as his crucified and risen Lord.

“My Lord and my God!” is of course Thomas’ response. Jesus asks him, “have you believed because you have seen me?” “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”.

This passage is very powerful, because it ends with a blessing that reaches across time to us. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”.

This is not a second-hand blessing! It is Jesus affirming that faith in every generation is real, honoured and cherished. We believe not because we have literally seen the risen Christ with our eyes, but because we have

encountered him in Scripture, in community living, in the sacraments, in moments of grace, and in the quiet movements of the Spirit.

And so, the peace that Christ leaves with us, is a reassuring peace that sends us out into our communities. Our Gospel reading this morning reminds us that resurrection is not just an event; it is an encounter. Jesus steps into fear, breathes peace and sends his followers into the world as bearers of forgiveness, hope and new creation. And so, as we continue to journey together through the Easter season, we are invited to be willing to surprised. In the light of our alleluias, the Spirit calls us to be open, fearless and faithful, willing to meet the risen Christ in both expected and unexpected places.

We may still have locked rooms. We may still have doubts. But the risen Christ continues to come to us – through closed doors, through uncertainty, through everything that feels like an ending and speaks the same words “peace be with you”. And as we considered earlier, this is not cheap consolation, a religious anaesthesia or inoculation against the difficulties and disappointments of life. This is a peace that is a person, the one who was there before the foundation of the world. This is not an indifferent command that says, “pull yourself together” or “think happy thoughts”, but an invitation into a relationship with the Lord of Life himself. This is the peace of one who has also known suffering and a sense of loss. An encounter with the risen Christ, is not always an easy journey to make, because True Life, Real Life, gently holds out it’s hand and invites us to set aside, the fantasies we may foster about ourselves, or each other, that narrow our vision or blind our capacity to see and hear of “the resurrections” that happen within the everyday experiences of being human.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” our Lord says to Thomas. Thomas was granted the opportunity to see and touch the wounds of our Lord. But that was only the initial step into an experience far deeper and all-encompassing, a springboard into journeying with the risen Lord. Strangely, in **not** having the same opportunity as Thomas, to see, to touch Jesus, Jesus calls us blessed! Of course it would be wonderful to literally see the risen Lord; but as his Church, as his body on earth, we must now see him in our bearing witness to the Gospel truth, as his body, we must learn to see each other and the world as a new creation in him, and we can only do that with resurrection eyes not confined to an upper room.

In a short while in this service, we will as you know “share the peace” together. As we do so, may the words that we use, remind us, that this isn’t just a pleasant exchange, but an acknowledgement that the ground upon which we stand has changed, a new creation has broken through the surface beneath our feet that calls us into a new relationship with each other and the world around us. We can say, “peace be with you”, because in his risen life, our Lord Jesus Christ has revealed that the faithfulness of God remains, even when all seems lost, and we retreat to an upper room of endings and failings.

Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, and may the peace he leaves with us, send us out in courage, in compassion, into a world viewed through resurrection eyes. Amen.