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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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2nd Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-29
“A Story of Empowerment”

The Doubting Thomas story has traditionally emphasized the physical presence of the resurrected Jesus where Jesus invites Thomas to touch him and so verify his actual presence.

We are not told whether Thomas actually touches Jesus but we infer that Jesus is physically present by his final words: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

What the disciples actually saw is anybody’s guess because this same passage says that Jesus is not in the room and then he is in the room. On two occasions it is said that the disciples are in a closed room and suddenly Jesus appears to them as if in a puff of smoke. In most of the resurrection stories Jesus appears and disappears.

I mentioned last week that men, thought to be angels, in dazzling clothes at the tomb where Jesus was laid indicates that we should read these stories symbolically or metaphorically. The same goes for the doubting Thomas story.

If one puts aside discussions on whether this was an actual appearance of Jesus or a symbolical appearance we come to an aspect of the story which is just as important.

It’s a story of empowerment. The purpose of Jesus’ visit is to empower the disciples to continue the ministry that he began with them and he does it in three steps.

First, he establishes peace among them. The first words that come from Jesus when he appears to the disciples are “Peace be with you.” This has become a greeting for Christians throughout the ages. The greeter says, “Peace be with you,” and the one or ones greeted say, “And also with you.”

Second, Jesus adds to his words of peace (using patriarchal language of the time): “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” The passage continues: “When he had said this, he breathed on them 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.’”

Third, in response to Thomas' acclamation, "My Lord and my God," Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." This affirms that we are a believing community. Jesus values belief. We believe (we do not prove) that Jesus' rose from the dead. We believe that life conquers death. We believe in resurrection.

Steps 1, 2 and 3 need unpacking.

Jesus establishes peace as the first requirement for ministry.

When I was a student at Rhodes University in South Africa I joined a group of students in a week-long work program with rural Africans. It was a peace mission where we worked with Africans and learned their customs and culture.

We spent a morning at an elementary school and during lunch break we sat on the side of the playground eating sandwiches. The kids were playing on the dusty ground. It was a poor, one-roomed school house with one teacher who was principal, teacher, bottle washer and playground monitor.

There was a commotion on the playground and the principal yanked a student from a group and thoroughly spanked him. One of our students swooped down and ripped into the principal, upbraiding her for what she was doing, embarrassing her in front of her children and embarrassing all of us looking on.

This student was as violent as the principal and in some ways more so by the way he came across and because he undermined the principal's standing and authority with her children. I thought at the time that my fellow student wasn't at peace with himself. If he was he would not have torn into the principal like he did. The more appropriate way was to gently intervene and speak to the principal at a later time.

That's why the resurrected Jesus says again and again as his first words to his disciples to and us, "Peace be with you." The first thing we need within ourselves is God's peace and we get it by learning about peace, meditating on peace, and integrating it as best we can *before* we go out to interact with our spouses, children, colleagues, neighbors, and those we perceive as doing injustices in our world.

With peace in our hearts, we hear Jesus saying, "As God sent me, so I send you." Think of the power and challenge of this. We know the efficacy of Jesus' ministry. As God sent him he now sends us. Our ministry is nothing short of Jesus' ministry.

Then scripture says, "When he had said this, he breathed on them 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.'"

We continue Jesus' work with the power of the Holy Spirit. That's how we can do what Jesus did. We are a spirit-filled people and if we are in doubt about this all we need to do is to be open to God's spirit and when we are open we will receive it and trusting we will continue the good work that Jesus began.

The first item on the agenda according to Jesus is to forgive. Forgiveness doesn't mean going to everyone who has wronged us and simply forgive them, whether it is those we know personally or political figures that have caused great harm by what they have done. We forgive those who are truly repentant for what they have done. There might be legal consequences but that's for the law to decide. We forgive people if they ask for it. There are times we forgive even when people do not ask for it. They may not know that they have wronged us and if we point it out it could cause a circle of reprimand and recrimination. And so we forgive and move on. All this doesn't mean that we accept unjust policies and activities lying down. We are *willing* to forgive and we work for peace and justice.

Suellen recounts a situation in South Africa when she was working with young, Christian, black and white students of university age. They were discussing issues of apartheid before doing ministry together. A black student said to a white student that he could only go out with him if he confessed to the crime of apartheid and sought personal forgiveness.

The white student said he wasn't responsible. It was the government and his parent's generation who began it and perpetuated it. He just happened to be born white.

They worked through their issues and the white student admitted that he was not conscious of how he benefitted from the apartheid regime and how by being uncritical he perpetuated the system. When he saw this, he confessed and was forgiven by God and the black student.

The black student confessed his anger and the ways he had internalized his oppression. He too confessed *and* with this new-found freedom and relationship the two students together engaged in a ministry of peace and reconciliation. Prayers were said and the Holy Spirit invoked for their ministry.

The challenge for our context is to see the divisions and fractures in our society and work for reconciliation, peace and wholeness. We might not agree with what needs to be done and that's why we seek the mind of Christ as we do Christ's work. There are issues of racism, feminism, sexual orientation, war, crime and environmental sustainability that need work in our society and world.

Finally, Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

What do we believe? We believe in the resurrection. We believe that life is stronger than death, we believe that peace is better than war, we believe that reconciliation is better than brokenness, we believe that justice is greater than injustice, and we believe the words of scripture (Romans 8:38-39) that “neither death nor life...will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The story of empowerment is life-affirming and life-giving. It is peace, it is ministry, it is Holy Spirit-inspired forgiveness and faith. It is Jesus' story as he reminds us and he helps us see that it's our story as well. That's the point of this gospel story. Amen.