

Peace-ing It Together

John 20:19-31

The Second Sunday of Easter\ Year C
2010

April 11,

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.

Haunted houses at Halloween, roller coasters at amusement parks, and horror movies at the local cinema all attest to the fact that we sometimes enjoy the thrill of a good scare. Though we may find ourselves frightened by these temporary and unreal situations, the fears evoked can be easily, even quickly, dispelled. A haunted house is not nearly so terrifying when we emerge from it, our Halloween costumes intact and our bodies no worse for wear. The thrill of a roller coaster doesn't last long particularly once the train returns to the platform and our stomachs settle, if a bit queasily, back to their proper places. Even the disturbing images conjured by a horror movie quickly fade from our minds, though perhaps not our dreams, once we depart the theatre and reenter familiar and safe surroundings. With little to no effort, we can cultivate a renewed sense of well-being and peace out of these fleeting fears even before they have dissipated from our awareness.

That said, sometimes fears are not nearly so fleeting. In fact, they can be incredibly real and will often defy our attempts to sweep them away, just ask the disciples in this Sunday's gospel reading. They have much of which to be afraid. So much, in fact, that they have locked themselves behind closed doors, a sensible precaution considering recent events. They are in hiding, according to Saint John, for "fear of the Jews." While the gospel writer doesn't go out of his way to portray the "Jews" in a flattering light, his statements must never be seen as a blanket condemnation of the Jewish people. After all, to do so would be patently absurd since the disciples themselves are Jews. In his gospel, Saint John uses the term "Jews" as a code word for anyone, whether ethnic Jew or ethnic Gentile, who stands in opposition to Jesus. Unfortunately, gross misunderstandings of Saint John's intent have throughout history unleashed peculiar horrors upon the Jewish people- the Nazi Holocaust occupies our most recent memories.

In this morning's reading, Jesus' death, let alone the strange disappearance of his body, has unsettled the disciples to the very core of their being. If Christ could be executed so horrifically, if he could be condemned with such bureaucratic ease then there is nothing, at least on earth, which can prevent the authorities from doing the same to the disciples. Christ's missing corpse only serves to heighten both the possibility of their arrest and the precarious nature of their position. Anyone, with an ounce of sensitivity, can see that their fears, far from being insignificant, are actually well grounded. They can do little but crouch in the growing shadows, peer out tentatively from behind bolted shutters, and wait for the grim knock at the door. They anticipate being rounded-up, within short order, by the security police. In their deep sense of confusion and loss, they expect nothing less than their arrest and death at the hands of the political establishment. They have little hope for the future and little peace in the present. They behave as

powerless victims rather than as empowered victors. We must not criticize them too harshly, however. After all, they still, as of yet, do not understand the scriptures that Christ must rise from the dead. They are merely trapped between the twin poles of ignorance and uncertainty, nothing more, nothing less. Despite the gripping nature of their fear, the dreaded knock-at-the-door, much to their relief, fails to come. Instead, the Resurrected Lord appears. He strolls right across the threshold that they have so carefully sealed. He enters into the midst of their palpable fear and floods the room in which they have buried themselves with his presence. In an instant, the disciples' desperate attempt to remain secure and to feel protected is undone. Their "safe house," fortified as it is against the authorities and perhaps even unwittingly against the demands inherent in the resurrection, is clearly not so safe. Jesus, it would seem, has no intention of allowing himself to be locked out, that said, neither will he announce his presence. He will not afford us the opportunity to debate whether or not we should let him in. He simply walks rough-shod through our walls in order to reclaim us as his own, to bring us together and to keep us together within the peace he now declares.

"Peace be with you," he shouts. The words are forceful and commanding. They summon us back to life. They resurrect hope in our midst and invite us to be present to Christ and to the world. Their strong cadence will not allow us to remain on the shaky sands of our grief and fear, instead they create solid ground on which we can once again stand. The locked room seems to vibrate in sympathy with the words Christ speaks just as the world, itself, trembles in the knowledge that Christ's ability to walk through walls has rendered the veil between this life and the resurrection life, between this world and the world to come, more thin than we can possibly imagine. The boundary we so greatly fear, the boundary we call death, is shown to have less substance than a breath of air. Christ's resurrected body offers us proof of death's impotence and yet his body still bears the scars of his passion. The hand he raises in glory, the hand he lifts in greeting bears a gaping hole. There are deep cavernous wounds in his feet, in his side, in his heart. In his tortured and yet glorified body, we are forced to look upon that which we did not wish to see before. We must look upon the sufferings of the crucifixion. We cannot hide our eyes from the one who is crucified anymore that we can avert our gaze from the conditions which make all such crucifixions possible. There is no where to flee from this Calvary. We must witness the wounds that violence and sin, that evil and injustice, the despair and fear, that the limits of community and the failure of our imaginations have inflicted. Yet, even as we face this woundedness in ourselves which, in turn, wounds others, there remains before us Christ's words of peace. His words break in upon us. They explode, threaten and exhilarate. The disciples rejoice upon hearing them in this morning's gospel. Their reaction is one of hysterical jubilation. Their fear, their confusion, their disbelief and their shock is transformed into laughter, even if it is for largely no other reason than that laughing is simply better than crying.

Christ shouts, once more: "Peace be with you!" He is trying to get our attention with his offer of peace, but what exactly is this peace that he would give us? Is the peace of Christ intended merely to allay our fears or is there something more embodied within this joyful declaration? After all, in the Roman world, peace was synonymous with order and stability. The *Pax Romana*, the "Peace of Rome" was maintained

through the carefully plotted use of force and domination. The imperial armies were ready to march at a moment's notice. Any threat to Rome's power was quickly suppressed with the sword. The "peace of Rome" was neither cultivated nor given. The Roman peace was imposed through the vanquishing of enemies, imagined or real. Strange, how even today, nations and peoples often find the methods of the Roman peace more palatable than the peace which Christ offers.

The peace granted to us by our Risen Lord is a different kind of peace altogether, a peace unlike any other in the world, a peace wrought through the vanquishing of death and the forgiving of enemies. We can not fashion this peace ourselves, no matter how hard we may try. The peace of Christ is a gift and if we wish to truly share in Christ's peace, then we must ourselves willingly pass through death into newness of life. The peace of Christ is deeply rooted within God's gracious forgiveness and loving acceptance of those who would follow where Christ leads. Our Lord accepts our strengths and our weakness even as we imperfectly offer them. He forgives what in us needs to be forgiven (and what must be forgiven) in order that he may, by his very grace, re-pattern our lives into the shape of a cross. In Christ, we become self-giving and forgiving. In Christ, we are enabled to express genuine care and concern for others, even those we may perceive as enemies. The peace that Jesus brings prompts us to set right our relationships.

We are empowered by the peace of Christ just as his peace empowers the disciples in today's gospel. "Peace be with you. As the Father sends me so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit" our Lord declares. He breathes on them and he breathes on us. He instills in us the power of his resurrection and the embodiment of his Risen Spirit. In one short phrase, he draws us into his mission, his way with the world and sends us out. We are terrified, but the peace Jesus provides us prompts us to face death gladly and to engage our present culture even though it may be largely opposed to the very power we now represent. Within the peace of Christ, we may no longer cower from the probability of our own crucifixion, rather we must embrace it as a certainty. His peace bestows on us his very life and power and with it we can make a difference in the world. We can work for the coming of the kingdom and continue our Lord's ministry of bringing salvation to all. We must set the prisoners free and forgive those who seek forgiveness, just as we must "hold bound" the unrepentant who perpetrate evil.

The peace of Christ will not allow evils to go unchecked and or to be let loose in our world. "If you retain the sins of any, they are retained" Christ tells us. In other words, if you hold them bound, they will be held bound. Which begs the question: "Who or what in our world needs to be held bound? Who needs to be held accountable for the violence, death and evil let loose through their actions and inactions? Governments and corporations, perhaps! How about those who manufacture weapons for profit or the nations who stockpile them? How about those who mock human dignity by denying people their basic needs of food, water, clothing, shelter and medicine out of fear and greed. What about those who play God, deciding who lives and who dies through such things as the death penalty and euthanasia? What about those who use religion to destroy people, not merely through suicide bombings, but by the condemning

others to living hells of exclusion? What about those who refuse to leave doors open, who refuse to model hospitality, for those who are repentant and engaged in processes of rehabilitation? What about those who deny that change and new life are possible? Do they need to be held accountable? Do they need to be held bound by the witness of the Church? The author, Megan McKenna, reminds us that anyone who uses death and violence, torture and legalized killing, institutional greed and rabid fear-mongering to manipulate others so that they can hold onto power needs to be held responsible. They need to be stopped even if it means one's own martyrdom. The peace of Christ demands nothings less.

The gift of Christ's peace is conditioned, however, on one's belief. Belief is not merely an exercise in intellectual assent, but a commitment of self to the very acceptance of the New Life given to us. Belief takes center stage in the last half of this morning's gospel reading thanks in large part to Saint Thomas. According to Saint John, Thomas wasn't present when Jesus walked through walls and entered into the locked room. His whereabouts remain something of a mystery. Some scholars argue that, while the other disciples were cowering, Thomas was off hiding in plain sight. As a twin, if the authorities were to recognize him as being one of the disciples, he could always pretend that they got the wrong brother. What's a little identity theft when one is attempting to preserve one's life. Such behavior, while hardly commendable, does remain rather fitting when one considers the less than admirable behavior of the disciples at Christ's crucifixion. When Thomas is finally told about Christ's appearance, he treats the events with a measure of skepticism. "We have seen the Lord" the other ten tell him. Thomas, however, refuses to believe them. He chooses to reject the community's profession of faith. Instead, he develops his own criteria of belief, a criteria which proves itself to be rather callous, insensitive and even violent. He declares that he wants to see Jesus for himself. He wants to reopen the Lord's wounds rather than taking the others' words for it. He wants to stick his fingers in the nail holes and jab his hand into Christ's side. In essence, he wants to see if Jesus bleeds. His criteria is not merely insulting, degrading and horrific, but utterly dismissive. The longer Thomas speaks, the more deflated the hope contained within the disciples' profession of faith becomes. We should, therefore, find it unsurprising that the disciples, as a result of their conversation with Thomas, choose to remain, for yet another week, sequestered in their room away from the world. The Word of God and the mission of Jesus are clearly going nowhere fast. Thomas, intentionally or unintentionally, has paralyzed the community. His behavior invites us to be vigilant over our own actions and inactions. Are there things which we are doing and saying that are paralyzing our community?

Jesus will not permit such paralysis to last long. He appears, once again, in the locked room. This time, however, Thomas is present. Jesus, not only, singles the apostle out but he calls his bluff. He repeats Thomas' words to him. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your other hand and put it in my side." In other words, "Use your criteria Thomas if you are so bound and determined to do so. But, in the end, do not doubt but believe." The funny thing is that Thomas is not doubting, at least, not in the usual sense of the word "doubt." Doubt is the energy of inquiry. Doubt is about questioning. Doubt is faith seeking understanding. The doubt which Thomas

expresses has more to do with stubbornness and hardness of heart than any fearless search for truth. Jesus' tone jolts Thomas from his persistent unbelief. "My Lord and My God," the apostle cries. His acclamation is a bit late and, interestingly, not based on faith, so much as sight. Thomas is making a statement of fact rather than belief. The proof Thomas has been asking for is in front of him, and it may be proof enough for Thomas, but it is not the proof which underwrites the faith of the church. The faith of the church must be content with less dramatic proofs. He must see Jesus in other ways. We must see him through the proclamation of his word, in the life of his community, in the receiving of the sacraments and in his presence among those who suffer still. John tells us that Thomas sees and so believes. We believe, however, and are enabled to see. Because of this, Christ pronounces a blessing on us, for we rely solely on the faith passed on to us by the church, a belief which opens us to the peace of the Holy Spirit, which permits us, even on our worst days, even on those days when we would cower and be afraid, to courageously stake our lives on the Resurrection. Blessed, indeed, our we who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

