

“Peace Be With You”

John 20: 19-31

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I always feel a little bad for the Sunday after Easter. It's a nice enough Sunday on its own, but it has the misfortune of always living in the shadow of the Big Easter. On Easter Sunday, everyone shows up and it is the best celebration in church all year. Even Christmas Eve, with its carols and candles doesn't quite come close to the brass and choirs and carried away joy of Easter. We were all there, wearing our best spring dresses and pressed suits. The energy echoed off of the walls of the sanctuary. Last week we were shouting “Alleluia! Wahoo! Yippee! Yes!” And then, when we left, there was more celebrating: egg hunts, family gatherings, baked ham, potato salad and chocolate bunnies.

But then you come to this Sunday...the second Easter Sunday....No more family from out of town. No more feasts. No more eggs. The chocolate bunnies have all lost their ears and most of their limbs. The brass players have gone back to Yale to study for finals. Some of us might even be a little Easter weary. I always hear from other clergy that this is the lowest attended Sunday in the entire year. I would say it's the Sunday when we preach to the choir, but even they are on vacation.

The Good News is, it doesn't really matter that our quietest day comes right after our loudest day. Some might say it forms a balance, that you need both high and low together. They can't all be mountain top moments. And the Good News is that it doesn't matter whether there are three hundred people or thirty people in the sanctuary. Haven't we been told that wherever two or three are gathered, Jesus will be with them? We all know that the miracle of the Big Easter Sunday is that the stone was rolled back from the grave and the resurrected Jesus appeared before his followers for the first time. But do you know what the miracle of the Sunday after Easter is? This Second Easter Sunday? The miracle of this day is that Jesus comes back once again. It doesn't matter who is here or who is not here. It is doesn't matter how

loud we are or how joyful we are. Jesus comes back to be with us, to continue to teach us and guide us and comfort us.

Jesus doesn't just come back for those of us who are gathered here right now. It's the same as the story we heard from the Gospel John today. Resurrection morning has come and gone, and so has Jesus, but he returns once again to see the disciples. He finds them locked away in a house. Our translation says they are hiding out of fear for the Jews but what it really means is for fear of the authorities, the Romans.

I also always wonder if, even though it doesn't say so explicitly, if the disciples were also locked away for fear of encountering Jesus. After all, they were each in their own way complicit with Jesus being put to death. Peter denied knowing Jesus on three separate occasions. The other disciples deserted Jesus and in no way spoke up for him or were even there to comfort him in his last moments. So, it wouldn't surprise me if they were a bit afraid of running into Jesus now that they have heard from the two Mary's that he has been resurrected. It makes sense to me that they would be locked inside their house with the curtains drawn tight. If I were them, I would be a little afraid of what Jesus might do given the kind of friend they had proven to be.

No kind of door or lock can keep out Jesus, though. He comes in and greets the disciples, without any regard to their betrayals. It's such a Jesus thing to do, isn't it? Here the disciples are, locked away and full of fear, and not only does Jesus find a way to reach them, but he calms their fears. He brings them a message of peace, and allows them to see his wounds, assuring the disciples that it is really him, Jesus has really come to be with them, once again.

A week later he does the exact same thing and shows up again, greeting Thomas, bringing that same message of peace, showing no anger when Thomas doubts that it is really him, but offering him the same gentle forgiveness and proof that he gave to the other disciples...Jesus shows up after Easter morning is over, and he keeps coming back. In coming back for the disciples, and in coming back for us, he has three lessons to share. Doesn't it always seem like there are always three lessons?

The first is that by Jesus continuing to show up, it is another way of saying that he continues to

forgive us. When Jesus gathered together his disciples before he died, on the night we call Maundy Thursday, he demonstrated a table fellowship of reconciliation. He told them and showed them that nothing could separate them from him, no matter what they did or didn't do, and no matter what was about to happen. The appearances to the disciples after his death and resurrection are an extension of that gathering in the upper room. In many ways, the message he preached to them that night was tested with his death and the disciples betrayal, but by returning he made good on his promise. Nothing could keep them from Jesus. Nothing could stop them from receiving his forgiveness. He will forgive over, and over, again. He will keep coming back, and continue to be in relationship with them.

We celebrate Easter, not just the day but the whole season, because Jesus keeps coming back. Because we keep experiencing that same forgiveness and reconciliation that the disciples experienced. Jesus has not left us. God has not left us. Humanity has certainly tested the limits of grace beyond our own comprehension—we have caused senseless violence and repeatedly hurt one another and the earth beyond belief—but still God remains with us. Jesus keeps coming back. Every time we gather together, it doesn't matter whether it is grand or humble, a mega-church or a mini-church. Every time we pray together, and ask forgiveness, it is given to us. Every time we are wracked with guilt and huddle in fear over God's wrath, we are instead met with a message of comfort. We are met with Jesus saying, “Peace be with you.”

The message of “Peace be with you” is the second lesson we receive on this Second Easter Sunday. “Peace be with you” is not a light-hearted greeting meant to be thrown around without care. When Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” he is saying “You are going to be okay. You are not alone. You are not in trouble. I love you. I am right here with you.” If “Peace be with you” were used in geology, it would be used to describe that moment when carbon crystals, deep in the earth, are under severe pressure. They are under so much pressure with so much heat from all sides that it appears at any second they will combust into dust. And in that moment, when it seems there is no other alternative and the pressure and the heat are more than the carbon crystal can withstand—in that moment, instead of turning into dust, it

turns into a diamond. It's like mother nature says, "Peace be with you. You are more than the pressure and the heat, you are something beautiful and precious. You have peace within you."

When it seems as if nothing good can come from us, or when we have messed us so bad there is no chance of redemption, we are offered peace. It is a message of transformation and redemption. It is given freely, without qualifications or requirements. "Peace be with you" allows us to start over after a horrible day. It allows us to undo our mistakes and our worst offenses—to turn something negative into something positive, to turn apathy into compassion and destruction into creation. "Peace be with you" are the words that allow us to pray that this will be the time we finally get it right. "Peace be with you," Jesus says, knowing these words will be life renewing and soul-sustaining to anyone who hears them.

The third lesson Jesus has for us is that not only will he offer these things to us, but in turn, we should offer them to others. Jesus appears before the disciples and offers them peace, and then he tells them to go out and do the same thing for other people. He tells them that they have the power to forgive the sins of others. We have the ability to show up for each other, over and over again, just like Jesus does. We have the ability to forgive each other. We have the ability to say "peace be with you" and witness the relief wash over someone as they are transformed by forgiveness. Jesus sends the disciples out, and he sends us out. He sends us out to the places that are hard. The places where relationships are broken and people are hurting. It's similar to the idea of paying it forward: once we have experienced the presence of God in our lives or once we have experienced the life-changing gift of peace and forgiveness, we are called to be that for other people. We're not God, but we are to go out and point out those places where God is. We are to be a living example of what it means to be a presence of peace and comfort. We are supposed to show up for each other, week after week, no matter what.

In order for the Big Easter Sunday to be Big each year, we need a second Easter Sunday. The power of Easter's resurrection would be diminished if Jesus did not continue to appear, if he had just left and hoped that everyone would just figure it out on their own. We need a second Easter Sunday. We need today to remind us, once more, that Jesus' message of radical love and grace is still relevant to our lives

and still available to us. On the fancy days, and the ordinary ones, too. We need a second Easter Sunday to be together, to offer each other that grace and love and peace and forgiveness. Jesus reminds us that whether it is a whole group of fearful disciples or one doubting Thomas, it is worth showing up for. Where God goes, we are called to be, spreading the message of forgiveness and peace for every living person, to be an Easter people, not just one Sunday, but the whole year. Amen.