Second Sunday of Easter

April 20, 2020

John 20:19-31

Every year, the Sunday after Easter, we hear the same reading, with Thomas seemingly front and center. It’s easy to miss other things in the text, like that it’s only once Jesus shows the 10 his hands and side that they rejoice upon seeing the Lord. Thomas is offered that same evidence, and Jesus asks, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe.”

Which, rather than questioning Thomas’ faith or lack thereof, could move us instead to wonder how else one can come to believe without seeing Jesus in person.

The disciples have their Pentecost moment here, as well, with Jesus breathing into them the Holy Spirit, saying, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” He ties being sent and receiving the Holy Spirit with the statement, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

In John’s Gospel, sin is a rejection of Jesus – of his ministry and teachings, and of Jesus himself, so Jesus isn’t talking about moral or behavioral transgressions. Sin is about being blind to the revelation of God in Jesus, and it’s about rejecting Jesus’ message of love and mercy, rejecting a life based on the way that Jesus lived his life.

So when Jesus says that when we forgive sins, they’re forgiven, and when we retain sins, they’re retained, he’s not saying that we have control over whether or not God forgives a person for doing something wrong, and he’s not saying that we get to be arbiters of what’s right and wrong.

He’s saying that, “to the extent that the world responds to Christ in faith and receives grace to turn away”[[1]](#footnote-1) from the things that separate us from God, sin is removed from the world. But when the world rejects Jesus’ teachings, rejects the ways Jesus taught us to live, the world retains the sin that results.

The gospels tell us of Jesus’ understanding of peace, and demonstrate for us that the way Jesus comprehends peace isn’t the same as the way the Pharisees did, or the way the political authorities did. It wasn’t about preserving the status quo at all costs. It wasn’t about enforcing peace through military might, which was how the Roman Empire kept peace.

Instead, Jesus’ kind of peace brings back into the fold all those who are vulnerable, those who are neglected, those who don’t have power or status. Jesus’ peace is about feeding those who don’t have enough to eat, offering mercy and acceptance to those who are told they’re unworthy. It’s about imagining the possibilities in a world where hope and love reign, and making it happen.

Jesus was sent into the world to bring peace, and he sent the disciples out with that mission. And if we’re going to call ourselves Jesus’ followers, that’s the mission we’re called to, as well. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we share a common mission, a common vocation, across time and place – to share the love of God, the peace of Christ, with others.

One of my favorite quotes is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. “Preach the Gospel at all times, and use words when necessary.” We do well to remember that our actions do just as much as our words, if not more, to bear witness to our faith.

Jesus was talking to men who were in hiding, afraid the religious leaders were looking for them, what with the news of the disappearance of Jesus’ body. But when they received the Holy Spirit, things changed. They changed.

These men – who were afraid for their own lives, who were mourning the loss of their teacher and friend, shocked by the betrayal of Judas, ashamed of their own betrayals – were offered the peace of God. Jesus entrusted these men and all of his other followers with the mission of sharing the things he’d taught them: the love of God, the importance of forgiveness, and the fact that a person’s worthiness isn’t based on money or status or power, but rather in the simple fact that each of us is a beloved child of God. He entrusted them with the mission to live out the Gospel, using words when necessary.

There is some irony, I suppose, in the idea of us hearing about the 11 being locked away in a room for fear of the religious authorities, when we are hiding at home for fear of a virus. The disciples had a choice after Jesus’ death. They could have gone back home. Tried to return to whatever their “normal” used to be.

Instead, while in that room, they were offered grace and peace, and they were given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and sent out to continue Jesus’ mission of bringing peace to the world. It was time for a “new normal.”

At some point, we will leave our homes. In the meantime, we can hope that life will return to whatever “normal” used to be for us.

But should we?

We have the gift of the Holy Spirit and are charged with continuing in the work of bringing God’s peace into the world. If ever there was a time to dream about what it would look like if God’s hope and love and peace reigned in our hearts, in our communities and throughout the world, if ever there was a time to change our lives and nurture habits that better reflect our faith, surely it is now.

Let us ask ourselves, then, how might we better live out the Great Commandment? How might we better live out our baptismal promise to live our lives following the example of Christ? For it is through others doing these things and sharing the good news of the Gospel that we have come to believe despite not seeing Jesus in person. And it is through us doing these things that others may come to believe.

The cross changed everything for the disciples. And it changes everything for us. Christ is risen! And he calls us into his mission to share God’s extravagant love with the world, so that all people might know His love and forgiveness.

May God guide us and strengthen us for service, so that all we do and say shows others His love.

1. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2,* Cameron Murchison [↑](#footnote-ref-1)