

“PEACE BE WITH YOU”

Easter Sunday, 2020

John 20:19-23

April 12, 2020

The very first Easter didn't take place in a crowded worship space. There were no piano/organ duets to open the service, no choirs – either voices or handbells, there were no sanctuaries filled with flowers or worshippers wearing their Sunday best. There were women who went to the place where they knew Jesus' body had been laid, and there were disciples locked in their house. It was a dangerous time for the disciples to be out and about, and they were afraid. They were afraid that the same fate that had fallen upon their teacher and friend would fall upon them if they were discovered.

Yes, these disciples wanted to believe the good news that they had heard from the women returning from the empty tomb. They wanted to believe the good news that Jesus had risen. But it seemed too good to be true. The disciples were living in a time of such despair and fear. If they left their homes they would certainly place their lives and the lives of their loved ones at risk.

Could a miracle really have happened? Could life really have won out over death? Could this time of fear and uncertainty really be coming to an end?

The disciples wondered this...from behind the locked door of their house.

We know living in a locked house, don't we? We know living in despair and fear, don't we? We know not wanting to take actions that would place ourselves or the lives of loved ones and others at risk, don't we?

- Here we are on Easter Sunday, celebrating from our homes for the fifth Sunday in a row
- The number of confirmed cases of coronavirus and the death toll continues to rise – in the United States and all over the world
- The limitations and guidelines keep growing – this past week we heard about the importance of wearing a mask when leaving the house
- “In-person” Family gatherings continue to be cancelled – many families will gather around the computer to telephone to be with family today
- More and more people are experiencing a cut in hours or worse yet, being laid off; other employees who are considered essential put themselves at risk every time they step into their workplace
- We fear for our elderly parents, and other loved ones whose health has been previously compromised

We know despair and fear, don't we?

The disciples gathered in the locked house were living in fear – a very real fear. Our scripture says that they were afraid “of the Jews.” The reference there is to the religious leaders – the same religious leaders who condemned Jesus to die. But might the disciples also have been afraid of Jesus? They had, after all, failed him. They denied and deserted him at his time of greatest need. Maybe the disciples were afraid of being confronted by Jesus.

And so they keep the doors locked and hide out. They try to keep out the ones who could destroy them. They try to keep out those who would confront them.

But here's what we know: The Jesus who walked right out of the “locked” tomb walked right into the locked room where the disciples gathered. No locked doors could hold this Jesus in, and no locked doors can keep this Jesus out!

Jesus enters the locked room and appears in the midst of his frightened disciples. He comes not to destroy them, not to confront them, but to bring them peace.

“Peace be with you,” he says. In our Western world we think of peace as the absence of war. But Jesus is a Hebrew using the Hebrew greeting for peace “shalom.”

In Hebrew “shalom” means so more than the absence of war. “Shalom” is taken from the root word shalam - it holds the meaning “to be safe in mind, body, or estate.” It speaks of completeness, or fullness. It is a blessing that connotes more than tranquility. It is a deep and holistic sense of well-being, the kind of peace the world cannot give; the kind of peace that doesn't come from hand sanitizer or face masks. Shalom also is a type of wholeness that encourages you to give back, to generously re-pay something in some way. “Peace be with you” – Shalom.

Parker Palmer reminds us that the Bible is full of angelic pronouncements to “be not afraid.” These are words that do not counsel against fear, they acknowledge the fear in which we exist. However, as Parker Palmer reminds us, these words invite us to not BE our fear.

We have a choice where to root ourselves. This pandemic easily invites us to root ourselves in our fear, to become our fear lived out. You see evidence of that happening for many:

- Folks hoarding food and other supplies out of fear of not having enough
- Farmers having to dump their milk with empty shelves in the stores
- Unbelievable demonstrations of racism as folks blame our Asian brothers and sisters for the virus
- Folks who believe they are going to get sick anyway, so why follow the rules

“Peace be with you” is Jesus’ invitation to root ourselves in something different:

- To believe the good news of the women who went to the tomb
- To root ourselves in life, in hope, in love, in service, in Jesus
- To live a type of wholeness that encourages us to give back

And you see evidence of that happening as well -

- Healthcare professionals going to every shift to serve those in need
- Grocery store workers making sure we have access to food
- Care facility employees serving our elderly
- Factory workers producing ventilators, facemasks and other items needed for our caregivers and healthcare professionals
- Scientists working tirelessly to understand the virus, discover treatments and create a vaccine
- Parents who are working at home and helping their children with online school
- Elderly who are sheltering in place and sacrificing face to face time with family
- Folks who are grocery shopping for their elderly neighbors or relatives
- Essential childcare workers who are making it possible for others to be on the front lines
- Teachers who are parading through their school neighborhoods to encourage children
- Children putting hearts in their windows and chalk art on their driveways

All of these folks are hope and love and service - Not because they do not have fear, but because they have “shalom” in the midst of their fear

- They have more than the absence of war or the presence of tranquility
- They have a deep and holistic sense of well-being
- They have a peace the world cannot give
- They have a peace that doesn’t come from hand sanitizer or face masks
- They have a type of wholeness that encourages them to give back

The natural thing to do when we are feeling anxious or threatened is ...

- To hunker down
- To lock the doors
- To become focused on our own security

When Jesus speaks “peace be with you”

- He invites us instead to a risky mission
- He breathes into our fear with the power of the Holy Spirit
- He reminds us that life is stronger than death

- He reminds us that love is stronger than hate
- He reminds us that peace is stronger than turmoil
- He reminds us that joy is stronger than sorrow

And all over the world we're seeing evidence of resurrection:

- You see it in our planet - NASA recorded a sustained drop in the levels of noxious nitrogen dioxide over China that has made the air more breathable
- With less boat traffic, the water in Venice's canals is clear instead of its usual murky green color
- Shelter in place orders reduced travel so much in LA that the skies are smog free
- You see it happening in Minnesota - after following our "Stay Home MN" orders, the projected death toll from the virus has been cut in half
- Maybe you even see it happening in your own life
 - Some of us are resetting priorities
 - Some of us have taken this time to develop healthier habits
 - Some of us have made more time for loved ones in our homes – we've gathered all of the kids around the dining room table at 8pm for family game night

"Peace be with you" is both Jesus' reassurance and his invitation to us

- To plant ourselves in "shalom" rather than fear
- To live in a type of wholeness that causes you to give back
- To trust that the resurrection means that life is stronger than death

Jesus didn't call the disciples out of the locked room, he encouraged them right where they were – as he encourages us, right where we are: "Peace be with you this Easter time and always."

Shalom, my friends. AMEN.