

*In the name of the Christ who continues to come back to us, bringing us peace, the Holy Spirit, and a job to do. Amen.*

This past week, Jean and I were in Scottsdale to do a memorial service for Jean's nephew, Dave. As I said that day, Dave was a kindred spirit to my sister Connie. As children, both of them were more concerned with others than they were for themselves. Each gave away most of their own belongings, because their first desire was to make others happy. The initial thing that you notice about people like Dave and Connie is their compassion and sensitivity toward others. The second thing you notice is that such people are regularly taken advantage of by other members of society. Their generosity is seen as weakness and people take and take from them until they have taken their very souls. People like Dave and Connie must be so shocked when they gleefully reach out to give, and someone doesn't just take what they give them, but everything else too. Then on top of that, they ridicule them for being so gullible. I wonder how such sensitive, caring people ever find their place in this world.

Handling the death of a person like Dave is even more difficult for family and friends than usual. The pain of separation and detachment is all there, but in addition, it is so difficult to not also feel a sense of personal failure and perhaps even shame, when a person so close to you dies from unnatural causes. We can't help but ask ourselves questions like, "How could I have let him down? What if I had handled this differently? If only I had been there when such and such happened. How could I let him die alone? The despondence we often feel after the death of a loved one is not just about them, it is also directed at ourselves.

It seems to me that the pain Jean's family is experiencing right now and the questions they are asking themselves, parallel directly with what the disciples had to be feeling in that locked down room this morning. Not only are the disciples dealing with the pain and separation of loss, but they also are living in total disillusionment. How could this have happened? Jesus was supposed to be the one that changed everything and now he is gone. But in addition to that, they too are dealing with the death of a generous, compassionate person who was also regularly taken advantage of by the people of that society. They too are dealing with the same sense of personal failure and shame. After all, they utterly and completely deserted Jesus when he most needed them.

Could it be, that the fear we heard the disciples experiencing last week and the fear that is obviously the overwhelming emotion of the disciples today, goes beyond the fear of what the authorities might do with them? Could it be that the Easter event itself may not have sounded like Gospel, like Good News, to the disciples? Could it be that maybe they were just a tad bit worried that Mary Magdalene could actually be telling the truth? What if it is true? What if Jesus really had come back from the dead? Of course seeing a dead guy is frightening enough, but how about a dead guy that you abandoned and denied knowing? If Mary, the overly sensitive woman, actually did something...well, then obviously Jesus has come back to read us the riot act. They could just hear it now. "Hey, where the heck were you guys when I needed you?" Perhaps that is the real reason the doors are all bolted tight in the upper room. Perhaps the disciples are most struggling with their own failure to support Jesus.

But of course, that is not what happened at all. As it turns out, the Christ in death

is even more compassionate and caring than the Jesus of life. No condemning, no judging, not even disappointment in the disciples. Instead, what does Christ say to them? "Peace be with you." Not only does Christ not chastise them, but he also gives the disciples a gift, the greatest gift possible. He breathes on them, offering them the Holy Spirit, offering them God's presence again, just like they had when he was alive. He tells them and shows them that they have not been abandoned. He suggests to them that the dream of God's kingdom they had imagined is possible again. But, and there is always a but, isn't there?, but there is a catch. Christ also makes it clear that this gift is not some sort of personal gift to them, some sort of private devotion and faith they can have with God all by themselves. Nope, Christ says to them, there's more. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." This gift of the Holy Spirit is Christ's gift not to the disciples, but to the whole world. It is now up to the disciples to make sure that the world gets the gift of Easter, that everyone experiences the same thing that they have just experienced.

If this story sounds a bit familiar to you, there is good reason. We have heard it before...in the beginning. Just as God breathed life on all of creation when life began, Christ has come back and returned life to us. Creation, Christ shows the disciples, and us, was not a one time event, just like Easter is not a one time event. Christ re-creates life in the world, then and now. And no matter what we do, no matter how we fail, no matter how well we hide in fear, the Holy Spirit still comes to us, bringing new life in the worst possible situations. And how do we receive this gift of the Holy Spirit? From the disciples, from each other. Then, Christ calls us to take part in this re-creation. Christ gives us the gift of the Spirit and tells us to make sure that all of the world gets it. Christ

re-creates God's presence in the world, and then he makes sure that we realize that this is not his job alone. "Just as the Father, sent me, so I send you." Christ calls us to be co-creators with God and with him, to re-create the world by breathing the life of the Holy Spirit into it.

It is at this point that the scared little puppy disciples finally get it. Suddenly, the Gospels tell us, they let go of their fear, they unlock the doors and they begin breathing life into others. We hear the results of their efforts in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. "They were of one heart and soul..no one claimed private ownership of any possessions...they gave their testimony and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them for as many as owned lands sold them and brought the proceeds."

That is the vision and the real life of that early church washed in the breath of the Holy Spirit. They re-create a new kind of world, a place where people started looking beyond their own safety, and started sharing what they had with others so that no one would be in need. They gave away their own stuff, just like Dave and Connie, so that others would be happy. Society continues to tell us that such behavior is irrational, that is foolish, impractical and pragmatically impossible. But those early Christians did it, and it worked. They re-created the world into something very beautiful.

Of course, it is not just the big, bad secular society that scoffs at such behavior. Today's church has rejected it also. The version of Christianity that we live today is so far detached from the vision in Acts that no one recognizes it anymore. Instead of fostering an image of sharing and caring for one another and bringing the Holy Spirit to all, modern day Christianity is seen in a very different light. This was brought home

recently by a statistical research company called The Barna Group. They did a three year study of 16 to 29 year olds outside the Christian tradition. They found that the overwhelming majority of them view Christians today with hostility, resentment and disdain. According to this study, here's how people outside the church categorize today's Christianity: 91% described Christianity as anti-homosexual. 87% said Christians were judgmental. 85% said hypocritical. 78% said Christians were old-fashioned. 72% said out of touch with reality, 70% said Christians were insensitive to others and, last but certainly not least, 68% referred to Christians as boring. Now it is good to look at such studies with a certain degree of skepticism. Perhaps this is just how groups normally judge people outside of their circle. But these same people did not judge others outside their group anywhere near as harshly as they did Christians. And when we look at the historical record of how people outside Christianity reacted to Christians in antiquity, we find something very different. For the most part, the writings we have suggest that non-Christians may have treated Christians with disdain, but they described them very much the way Luke describes them in the book of Acts. One example is the writing of the pagan emperor Julian the Apostate, who strongly opposed Christians, taking away their rights and generally treating them poorly. But here is what he said about them; "The godless Galileans feed not only their poor but ours also. Those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them."

How did this happen? How did we get so far out of whack with the early church's vision that 70% of outsiders now find us insensitive to others?

I would suggest that this shift in what Christianity has become begins with our interpretation of today's Gospel. We have most often heard it as a treatise on dogmatic

belief. We see Thomas as the bad guy in the story, the one who lacks faith because he would not believe until he saw with his own eyes. A good Christian then, is one who believes not in the ideas of Christ, but rather believes in tenets about Christ. From this, we turned Christianity from an action based faith to a belief based faith.

But I believe such a focus on Thomas in this story has caused us to miss the Fourth Gospel's central point. This story is not so much about Thomas as it is about all the other disciples, who, you may recall, has already seen the risen Christ a week earlier. The bizarre thing is, even though they have experienced the risen Christ, how do we find them today? Still locked up in a room, scared to death. They continue to live in fear and despair despite their Easter experience.

By contrast, Thomas has not closed himself off from the world. The reason he does not see Christ the first time is that he is out and about, not living in fear. And when he sees Christ, he immediately responds, "My Lord and My God!" Thomas instantly begins living into the Easter experience, while the rest of the disciples have continued living in fear, a fear that causes them to barricade themselves from the world. Thomas is not the bad guy today, Thomas is our example. He is the one that desperately wants to have an Easter experience and hears Christ's call to spread the Holy Spirit to everyone.

Heaven knows all of us have plenty to fear in our present lives. Our lives are filled with so much more anxiety than people in Jesus's day could have even imagined. It is a wonder any of us can still stand up at the end of a day after facing the tensions we must face on a daily basis in our personal lives, not to mention the fears of economic collapse, societal upheaval, constant wars, terrorist attacks and on and on and on. My guess is that most of you, like me, are feeling pretty overwhelmed this second Sunday of

Easter, even though, like the disciples, we too have already experienced the Risen Christ. In fact, come to think of it, it has also been one week ago today since we too had the Easter experience.

It is not difficult for us today to understand why the disciples continued to live in fear after having an Easter experience. It is certainly understandable why we, would do the same thing, locking ourselves away in the safety of the church or our personal lives. This has always been the greatest temptation from the disciples to us. We want to protect ourselves from the anxious and dangerous world around us by making the church and our personal lives a refuge against all the crap that is going on out there. But beloved, that is not our call. We were never meant to be a refuge from the world, but we are called by Christ today, to be a living presence in the world.

The reason that the huge majority sees us as hypocritical and judgmental today is because we are. We have created a church of refuge rather than a church of action and compassion. We have hid ourselves behind rules of behavior and a dogmatic belief system because we are scared, because we live in fear of a world that can harm us in so many ways.

Fear, beloved, makes cowards of us all. If we are going to live into Christ's call, if we are going to once again become the church of Acts, we, like the disciples, need to unlock the doors. We, like Thomas, must let go of our fear and embrace the fact that we are Easter people. We need to realize that we already have the gift of the Holy Spirit and with it, there is nothing to fear. We need to be *in* the world and stop worrying about whether we will become *of* the world. We need to stop worrying about what someone believes and start caring about whether they are safe and they have enough to eat. We

need to stop worrying about our personal salvation and start caring about the salvation of the world and all that is in it.

That is our mission, should we choose to accept it. And what happens if we do? Christ comes to us and says, "Peace be with you." In the midst of our anxiety comes calm, followed by the immense joy experienced by the disciples when they are able to let go of their fear and live Easter and spread Easter to all. It sounds counterintuitive, heading out into the world when that is the place that causes our trepidation in the first place. But when we do so, Christ keeps coming back, Acts happens, and we create the world that Christ envisioned.

The time has come to leave the church of judgment and return to the church of compassion. It is time to let go of our fear and embrace the abundance and joy of Christ's presence with all of creation. Alleluia. Christ is Risen, not just for us, but for all of the world. Amen.