

“A Spirit of Sharing”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 8, 2018

Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:32-35

Rev. John Wahl

John 20:19-31

In today's second reading, we find ourselves on the evening of resurrection day, Easter Sunday, and the disciples have gathered together behind locked doors. This sets the stage for the second appearance of the risen Jesus in John's gospel – the first having happened that morning in the garden to Mary Magdalene.

Now Jesus comes and stands among them, meeting his friends and followers in the midst of their fear, offering them the greeting of *peace be with you*. As Frances Taylor Gench reminds us, “These words represent much more than a greeting or a wish, but rather a statement of fact and fulfilment of a promise made during their last meal together: *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.* (John 14:27) Now he fulfills that promise, transforming the situation of his followers with a gift of peace.”¹

We might consider the passing of the peace in our weekly worship services as a time of welcome, but it really is more. We do it immediately after having confessed our sins and received assurance of being pardoned. We do it as a sign of the promised reconciliation with God and thus a possible reconciliation with one another. Offering the peace of Christ that the risen Jesus gave to his disciples is a moment of sacramental remembering. Through it we are reborn, restored and renewed. It is a defining moment for a community of faith.

The second thing that Jesus gives to his disciples that night – after this announcement of the gift of peace – is a mission. With their fear addressed and peace conferred, the disciples are commissioned and dispatched as Jesus says to them: *As the Father has sent me, so I send you.* (v. 21) In this one powerful sentence, his followers are literally pushed out of the door they had locked behind them when they gathered. They do not go alone, though, for Jesus breathes upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit; he literally “inspires” the church for mission. In the same way that God's breath enlivened

¹ Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 134

the first human being in the creation story, God in Jesus breathes life into the community of faith to be heart, hands and feet in the world.

Thomas, of course, was not there that night. So when the disciples come saying that they had seen Jesus, Thomas doesn't merely doubt them, he flat out doesn't believe. So, when he demands to see and feel that mark of the nails in Jesus' hands, it's less a request for proof than it is mocking the disciples' story. He makes the demand because he knows it will never happen; it's as absurd as what his friends are claiming.

But Jesus comes in a third appearance, and takes these mocking words and turns them back on Thomas; not to humiliate or scold him, but instead to confront him with the possibility that his reality, his vision of what is possible, is too limited. Thomas did not just doubt, he did not believe. So, when Jesus calls him to faith, he is actually inviting him into a new and wider reality.

Belief in John's gospel is never a noun, but always a verb; believing in Jesus is an act of being in relationship with Jesus. It's not Thomas's doubting or demanding of proof that really matters in the end, it's his believing. Everyone has doubts, but not everyone believes. And while not everyone gets visible proof, how blessed – Jesus says – are those who have not seen, and yet still believe.

There are some Thomases in every congregation; and sometimes, they stand even in our pulpits – those are the disciples of today who are looking and needing to be invited into the new reality that God created when Jesus rose from the tomb. This reality continues to be shared each time that we gather in the name of the resurrected Lord: when we remind each other about peace and reconciliation, when we feel the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and when we hear the commission of being sent into the world in the same way the Father sent Jesus.²

In our first reading today, from Acts, we hear testimony about how the church not only continues the ministry of Jesus, but amplifies it. Earlier, at the end of Acts, chapter 2, and here in chapter 4, we find passages about what resurrection practices look like in a communal context. They show us how the church lives together – worshipping, singing, praying, eating, working and sharing together – as it continues and amplifies the ministry of Jesus.

In these passages, we are challenged to imagine a church community living with *great grace* and as *one heart and soul*. (v. 33, 32) Their unity of purpose and action seems to have been characteristic of the earliest Christian communities, and that unity was displayed as the amazing reality that *they had everything in common*. (v. 32)

² David Lose, "On Realities Old and New"

In the history of the Christian church, some have seen this as a blueprint for living, which has resulted in all varieties of communes and cults; others see this as a utopian or socialist fantasy. It's all-too-easy to critique modern congregations as mere expressions of consumerist affiliation: we choose the location and kind of church we like, participate in the things we like, and associate with the people we like. To some degree, this is true, but a depiction that fails to account for those grace moments when true community happens: when the hungry are fed, the lonely befriended, the sick visited, and justice runs down like an ever-flowing stream.

This description of communal unity and sharing in the early church would have appealed to ancient virtues – both Hebrew and Greek – which promoted practices of hospitality and sharing with those in need. Early church members would have found the idealism in Acts 4 to be more appropriate than surprising. Capitalism and communism were not concepts that the ancients would have understood; but looking after the widows and orphans, setting aside something for those less fortunate; these ideas would have resonated then as, we would also hope, now. Enlivened by the Holy Spirit, these accounts thus say less about model church practices and more about the power of God in the life of believers.

Maybe *great grace* is a flawed goal; for, by definition, grace comes as a gift from God. To reduce the testimony of Acts 2 and 4 to a checklist of behaviors is to miss what being of *one heart and soul* entails. But to receive these snapshots as testimonies of how God's resurrection power animates the life of the church opens up the possibilities for our faithful response.³

The apostles hold their goods in common so as to better witness to the resurrection and to ensure that there are no needy among them. We also work within our own systems, including our faith communities, to try and minimize the existence of those who have little or nothing. By so acting, scripture tells us, we are bearing witness to the resurrection of the Lord. Are there needy among us? If yes, then that is a problem; and as Jesus was sent by the Father, so Jesus now sends us, equipped and inspired, to try to meet those needs. And so, we participate with other local churches in the CROP Walk to help bring an end to hunger, we build houses in partnership with Habitat for Humanity, we open our doors to those people seeking to overcome addictions, and we support a safe and nurturing preschool program; just to name a few.

Our efforts and our unity, of course, are never perfect. We have a hard time sharing all things – let alone some things. And yet, in countless places and ways, every day, the church continues to witness to the power of Jesus' resurrection. And even though our many different faith communities cannot agree on whether it's okay to ask the Virgin Mary to pray for us, or who should be included at communion, or whether babies

³ Greg Carey from *WorkingPreacher.com*

should be baptized, or whether the Bible says the earth is 6000 or billions of years old; despite it all, the church continues to exist as a living testament to the truth of Jesus' sending.⁴

In John 20, Jesus tells Thomas that many people would come to believe that had not been eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ. Today, we are living proof that belief is a verb; that it is about a relationship with a God that we may never see, but whose will for creation is being made known each day in the way that believers are seeking *great grace* through a spirit of sharing with those who are in need. That's right, Thomas looked for proof that Christ had risen, demanding to see the wounds left by the nails in Jesus' hands. Little did he know that he, along with his fellow disciples – both then and in the centuries since – would become evidence of the Easter miracle.

Sisters and brothers, as Easter people, we need not gather in fear, for even though we have not seen, many of us have believed. As believers, therefore, we share with one another the gift of peace, we are enlivened and inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit, and we are sent into an imperfect and needy world – one with imperfections and needs that sometimes seem too deep and strong to overcome. And yet, we ourselves are the evidence that *great grace* is truly possible; that it comes from God and is shared through those who believe and follow. AMEN.

⁴ Scott Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence*