

Peace and Love: More than a Slogan

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So, the tomb was empty. Jesus was raised. The Resurrection happened. It has been proclaimed and celebrated. Now it is time to return to the daily routines we've gotten used to, back to normal. All the hoopla of Easter morning, with the Easter Egg Hunt between the services, and the weeklong production of special services – Palm Sunday with its opening parade and the Easter Play that followed, Maundy Thursday with the prayers for healing with *The Ragman* at Noon and the Passover Seder in the evening, Good Friday with the Stations of the Cross at Walsh and our TENEBRAE here at Zion – and the season-long series of Sunday evening dinners and Sunday evening services for Lent: it's all history. Now our lives can return to normal, with a sigh of relief from the exhausted, and, for many who joined us last Sunday, it's time to get back to living as if Easter never happened.

That's where our Gospel text picks up the story. *"When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked, for fear of the Jews..."* In other words, they were huddled in fear. They believed ... that what happened to Jesus might happen to them! They had left the Upper Room following the Passover Seder confident that Jesus would act to assert his power, to establish his kingdom, and to inaugurate God's reign. But that is not how things happened. Instead, there was division among their ranks, a betrayal in the Garden, the false arrest, the sham trial, the cry for crucifixion, and then the suffering and death of Jesus. It wasn't what they expected at all. As I said, they believed that what has happened to Jesus might happen to them. That's why they were huddled in fear. Sure, there were rumors of an empty tomb, but that did not replace their fear with faith.

Our Gospel tells us that on that first Easter night (John 20:19), and then again one week later (John 20:26), the disciples were still in that same house, behind those same locked doors. This time Thomas was with them. *"Although the doors were shut, Jesus appeared and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"* These were the same words he had shared with the eleven huddled in fear on week earlier. *"Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you."* But they didn't go anywhere. They stayed right where they were, as if nothing had happened. The tomb was empty. Jesus was raised. But they remained stuck behind locked doors, as if nothing had happened to transform their fear into faith, as if nothing had happened to move them to action.

The week before Jesus appeared in their midst, and breathed on them the Spirit of life. *"Receive the Holy Spirit. Go forth in power. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any they are retained."* That led, well, to nothing. What did Jesus have to do the get these followers up and moving? *"Put your finger here and*

see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe!" (John 20:27) It seemed that Thomas got the point, with his words, "My Lord and my God!" But Jesus wanted to be sure. "Have you believed because you have seen me, and touched me, and made the connection with your hands to you head and in your heart? Blessed are those who have not seen, but still believe that I am the Christ, God's Son, the One who reveals God's will, God's love, and God's life." But again, we must still come to terms with our Lord's call and the Spirit's power to go and serve by proclaiming the Good News that in Jesus God's grace has not only come near. It is ours. We have the gifts – God's love, God's peace, God's promise to be with us, now and forever. But will it move us to action? Will it move us from being locked in our fears, to live the life, offer the service, and make the difference that God's grace makes possible?

Last Sunday during the sermon I spent some time reflecting on Gregg Evanoff's experience of God's peace in the ambulance on the way to Mercy's Coronary Care Unit. He felt his life slipping away, at least, the paramedics did. But as he described it, it wasn't panic but peace that claimed the moment. Imagine that. His day was shot; his plans, undone; his life was coming apart at the seams. His family was thinking who knows what. The unimaginable was not only at the doorstep; it was in the door, and Gregg was on the gurney. If ever there was a moment for panic to set in, that was it! But, again, as Gregg described it, it wasn't panic but peace that filled him and the moment. Why is that? What makes that possible? It's simple, sort of, if you're the one experiencing it. In that moment, with death knocking at the door, with all the moorings in life unloosed and unhinged, with who knows what coming, he trusted God. He turned his attention from the things he didn't know, couldn't see, and hadn't experienced before; and he trusted what he did know, what he had known all his life, what he has enjoyed lately through his fellowship with us, God's love. He still didn't know what was happening, or what lay ahead; but he trusted God with all that he had and all that he was. It could have been fear and panic; but instead it was peace, the peace that comes with trusting God's love, the peace that comes with entrusting our lives to God.

Beginning this Sunday, the series of consecutive readings that are highlighted with our Second Lesson during the season of Easter are drawn from John's First Epistle. This week it is the text that grounds our *Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness* every Sunday. "*If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" (1 John 1:8) Next week it is a memorable baptismal promise: "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*" (1 John 3:1) Then, we will read a classic passage about love, telling us that "*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*" (1 John 4:16) This is the text where we hear what helps us understand what happened to Gregg. Why was it peace and not panic, trust and not fear? John tells us. "*There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.*" (1 John 4:18) So, it's simple, sort of. Trust comes over us because we know this love, God's perfect love, the love that casts out all fear.

Getting back to our readings for the Second Sunday of Easter, John 20 includes a series of texts following Jesus' resurrection that show Jesus on a trust-building mission. He hadn't broken faith, but his disciples had. Their hopes had been shattered – their hopes in God, their hopes for Jesus, and for themselves – all had been shattered with Jesus' death, and not just with his death, but with their betrayal, their silence, their abandoning Jesus, and leaving him to die alone on the Cross. So, John reports these encounters with the disciples, beginning with our Gospel text today, where Jesus finds the disciples locked in fear behind closed doors (John 20:19-31), followed by another text that recounts a fish fry by the seashore where Jesus talks with Peter, and the others disciples, reassuring them of his love, so that they might trust his love and share it with others. (John 21:1-17)

John's Gospel makes it clear that Jesus wants the disciples to experience his peace. *Peace be with you* are the first post-Resurrection words out of his mouth, not just once, but three times. But in order for his disciples to experience this peace, they must first trust his love. That is what Gregg experienced two Friday's ago on his way to Mercy Medical Center; and that is what the disciples learned two millennia ago – in the Upper Room, behind locked doors, at the fish fry by the seashore, through their mission to the world. Gregg encapsulated the wisdom of the ages in that moment when peace replaced panic, and fear of what we don't know gave way to trust in what we do know, namely, God's love. To be sure, this peace is intensely personal, reaching to the deepest layers of who we are, touching the very depths of our souls. But this peace does not stop there, within us, with our relationship with God. It wants to infect our relationships with others, forming the communities we serve, and transforming the world we live in.

That's what our First Lesson is telling us. Early Christians wanted trust to replace fear, not just in their hearts, but also in the world, a world that was filled with issues of scarcity and every sort of need. This early Christian experiment with communism, so-called, reported in Acts 4, did not last long; but it did represent the first of many on-going efforts to trust the love God gives rather than the stuff we've saved. There is nothing doctrinaire in the one-line description that "*no one claimed private ownership*", but "*everything they owned was held in common.*" (Acts 4:32) You see, the *Book of Acts* is not about the rules we make, the institutions we create, or even the accomplishments we treasure. Rather, it is about showing God's love in action through the lives of those who were given the power to break through their fears, to trust God's love to guide their lives, to shape their communities and transform their world, which is exactly what God's love did, and does. Let's face it, there are as many ways to trust God's love and live God's grace as there are communities and people in need of a witness to the power of God's presence alive among us. The first post-Resurrection words out of Jesus' mouth upon meeting his followers were these: "Peace be with you." In other words, it all begins with this gift of peace, with fear giving way to trust, and panic giving way to peace. But it doesn't end with inner peace. This is the just the beginning, the beginning of a mission through which God will change our lives and our world through the witness of those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, and who are willing to live this faith like we mean it ... in Jesus' name. Amen