

Commanded and Empowered

John 20:19-21

2nd Sunday of Easter

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Last week was Easter Sunday, actually the first Sunday of the Season of Easter. Easter, as a season, lasts until Pentecost, which is not until June 9th this year. Between Easter, the morning of the Resurrection, and Pentecost, when the Disciples receive the Holy Spirit, is fifty days. But, if you listen closely to our reading from the Gospel of John, you may hear something that would seem to dispute that. Our reading this morning is John, chapter 20, verses 19 to 31. It takes place on the evening of that first day of the week; the day when Mary found the tomb of Jesus empty. Listen now, to this part of John's story about the resurrected Jesus:

¹⁹ 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, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

Sermon

This rather long reading can be divided into three sections: Jesus appears to the disciples, the narration about Thomas, and the purpose of John for telling this story. For the most part, I am going to skip the bit about Thomas and focus on the beginning and the end of our reading.

In the first section, the disciples are locked in a room. John tell us the reason they are there: "for fear of the Jews." Easter, what Easter means to us, resurrection and life, had not happened for the disciples. They were still living the horror of Friday. Their leader, teacher and beloved friend had been brutally killed. They only knew shock, sorrow, fear, maybe guilt and regret. Their world had crumbled. Jesus was dead, and for all they knew they might be next.

What would they do? Where would they go? Would they even be safe?

Then the scripture says; "Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you."

Jesus came to them, where they were. In this time of great fear and uncertainty the resurrected Jesus came to his disciples with the simple message; "Peace be with you".

While a common greeting of the time, we can't, as I'm sure the disciples couldn't, help but find more meaning, more comfort in those words. Jesus came to them not only physically, in the same place, but emotionally in their place of fear with a message of peace. Not a general peace to the world, but the very personal, individual message of "Peace be with you."

The verse continues, "he showed them his hands and his side." Proving who he was, but also showing them that he had physically risen from the grave.

Then, John says, "the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

Thomas gets most of the grief for doubting, being a "doubting Thomas," but we should give Thomas a break. Mary told the disciples about the empty

tomb. Mary told them about seeing and speaking to the Jesus outside the tomb. But they did not understand, did not believe, until they saw for themselves. They had the same doubts as Thomas. It took the same appearance of Jesus and evidence of his hands and side, before they understood the reality of the risen Christ.

Again Jesus says, "Peace be with you..."

And Jesus continues: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." As God sent Jesus to earth, the purpose for his coming to earth, Jesus transfers to his disciples. His message, his mission, his teaching is now their message, their mission, their teaching. Everything he did in his life on earth is what they are to do. God sent Jesus to earth to preach a message of peace and love; the disciples are to preach a message of peace and love. God sent Jesus to heal and care for the sick and lame, the disciples are to heal and care for the sick and lame. God sent Jesus to show a new way for people to come to the Father, the disciples are to show the world a new way to come to God.

Then, according to John, Jesus did something that plays havoc with the liturgical year. Our passage continues: "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

On the very same day of his resurrection, Easter Sunday, Jesus gave his disciples the Holy Spirit. That's not supposed to happen for seven weeks when we get to Pentecost. In Luke's account, The Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles, this doesn't happen until Acts chapter two, where it says:

"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Forget the timeline; the accounts are very different. Where is the great wind? Where is the fire and the racket of people each talking loudly in a different language? In John the disciples receive the Holy Spirit as a breath from the resurrected Jesus. The Greek word translated here "breathed" is an uncommon word, in the Greek Old Testament it is the same word used in Genesis chapter 2, when God breathed life into Adam. It is used again in Ezekiel chapter 37, when the prophet is instructed to breathe life into the dry bones. This is the life giving, life starting, life filling breath of God. When Jesus breathed on the disciples, he filled them, with the Holy Spirit of God. First, he gives them the monumental task of taking over, filling his shoes, continuing

God's purpose on earth, and then he fills them with the Holy Spirit to give them the power to follow through.

In the final verse of our reading, John wrote: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." The gospel message is given to us so that we might believe the truth of these words. Mary met Jesus in the garden, the disciples met Jesus in the locked room, Thomas met Jesus when he returned a week later but we: you and I and every Christian since then has come to believe because of what we were told, what we read, or what we heard proclaimed in the name of Jesus Christ.

What do we learn from this reading?

First, no matter where we are, in our deepest fear the resurrected Jesus comes to us and offers peace.

Second, we should accept the fact that we may have doubts; it's natural, but when Jesus comes to us all those doubts will go away.

Third, we are to accept the charge of continuing Jesus' work here and now. God sent Jesus to earth to preach a message of peace and love; we are to preach a message of peace and love. God sent Jesus to heal and care for the sick and lame, we are to heal and care for the sick and lame. God sent Jesus to show a new way to come to the Father, we are to show the world a new way to come to God. God sent Jesus to give his life; we are to give our lives for the sake of God's children.

Fourth, God fills us with the Holy Spirit to empower us and show us how to accomplish all that Jesus has commanded us. Because it is now up to us, and to the other followers of Jesus to share and spread the word, to tell and retell the story of the amazing life and resurrection of the Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Because that is how people come to know the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are commanded; as God sent Jesus, Jesus send us. We are empowered; receive the Holy Spirit and go out and tell the world.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, you sent your Son to show us how to live as his disciples. As he came to the disciples in their time of fear and trepidation, the Holy Spirit comes to us in our time of need. Empowering us to know your truth and to tell the world of your amazing power. Be with us, mighty God, as we are your church; as we are your disciples, in this world today. Amen.