

Jesus Came and Stood Among Them

John 20: 19-30

Sunday, April 3, 2016

Rev. Dr. Rosemary MacKay, Guest Preacher

The Congregational Church of Needham

As we continue on in the Gospel of John about the Easter story, we hear another account about his disciples and the state they are in. Just imagine, they are gathered together, not sure what they are supposed to do. They are afraid and disillusioned. It wasn't supposed to end like this. If ever there was a sure thing, Jesus should have been it, this was the Messiah, the one Israel had spent generations waiting for. He walked for miles, and spent his precious moments healing the sick, casting out demons, challenging the religious institutions and raising the dead. He was incredible. He should have been king. Yet here the disciples were. Their leader had been crucified, dying a shameful death, reserved for the lowest of criminals. The followers of the king now spent their moments huddled together in a room filled with fear concerning the eventual onslaught of those who hunted them, the ones who sought to end this movement of the man from Galilee. Fear was thick and tangible. Surrounding everyone and filling each word and look.

We know this fear. Every single day we are told to be afraid, we are told not to trust. From crime rates to unemployment, terrorism or ISIS, whether it's about the government, the banks, the establishment, religion or politicians - we are afraid and do not trust. We are reminded that we are on the brink of nuclear inhalation or the inhalation of our earth due to greenhouse gasses and carbon emissions. We are told to be afraid of immigrants. As a nation we are afraid of death and illness. We are told to be afraid because we haven't saved enough for our retirement and that Social Security will end. We are afraid of cyber-attacks and identity theft. We are afraid for our frail elders and their safety as they live with dementia. We are afraid for our young people because of the prevalence of drug abuse and opioid overdoses. We are afraid of what our young children have access to on their iphones. We are afraid of what we lack, our failures, our past. We are afraid of each other. That fear has trapped us. Like the disciples after those early moments after Jesus' death, we've locked ourselves in an upper room, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Aung San Suu Kyi, political activist, prisoner, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and recently her party in Myanmar has won the presidency, the first democratically elected president in 50 years ending military rule said

it plainly: "The only real prison is fear, and the only real freedom is freedom from fear." Like those early disciples, we are well aware of fear and the prisons we lock ourselves in.

However, as we heard in our passage, there is a better way. On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed. Again Jesus says "Peace be with you." Locked in a prison of their own making, the disciples have completely lost themselves and forgotten their mission. They are not living their identity. As we all know too well, fear does this. It turns us inward, and as we succumb to the fear, the call to an outward life of Christ-likeness turns inward. Instead of looking out and giving to others, we become self-preserving. It's into this self-preservation and self-imposed prison that Jesus steps into, and into the darkness, into the fear, he proclaims peace. Peace the word Jesus speaks here is equivalent to the Hebrew word Shalom - meaning, peace, wholeness, fullness, harmony. Wholeness. Fullness. Having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself. Living in the way and living out of the life and identity we were created for. It is God's desire to restore justice, harmony and peace in our world. God desires to bring about peace and God doesn't intend to do it alone. God has invited us in partnership to do this together. We are created to be together, living in community with one another, sharing life together, forgiving one another, and inviting everyone into the Kingdom of God. Fear short circuits this calling. We stop seeking justice, fighting for reconciliation and advancing God's realm. Martin Luther King Jr. writes: "If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective". We get so caught up in our own lives we fail to look up and look beyond. We become so comfortable in our own world; we forget to look up and beyond. For Jesus peace seems to mean, not the absence of struggle but the presence of love. The presence of love that goes on reaching beyond what is known, beyond what is comfortable, beyond to what our world needs.

And if all of this isn't enough, Jesus then gives the disciples the Holy Spirit - he breathes on the disciples, and tells them: "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins will be forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." He is saying yes, I understand you are afraid, but be at peace. For you aren't helpless. You aren't hopeless. You aren't alone. Go live in the power of the Holy Spirit. Live in faith and trust and hope. Not fear. Know that you are not going at this alone, and as you do it, know that even the power of sin and death cannot hold you. We are called to action, to not just proclaim Christ's resurrection, God's power even over death; we are asked to live it.

Last week, my pastor, Helen Nablo, preached that "Easter is less a noun and more a verb. We are not asked to believe *in* Easter - that is, to be full of certainty about exactly what happened with the empty grave, the grave cloths, or Jesus' physical body...what we are asked to believe is in the power of God to Easter us. That is to say the power of God to bring us, each one of us today, from death to life, from despair to hope, from preoccupation to service to others. Easter us, dear God. Easter us today. And when we are Eastered when we feel our spirits shifting from confusion to clarity of purpose, from passivity to action we'll know we are joining with those who over the years have proclaimed with lips and lives: "He is risen from the dead" - Risen and living within each one of us too.

Today we participate in Communion. One more way that God reaches out to us. One more way we are given strength to live the Gospel message. Everyone is invited to this table, not because we must but because we may. Not because we have any particular claim on heaven's reward but because we are promised grace for the living of each day. We are invited to this table just as we are. Everyone is welcomed. As we partake in the Lord's Supper we not only remember and commemorate what Jesus did with his disciples in the upper room, we participate along with Christians throughout the centuries who do the same thing. And it is not just a ritual we participate in. We are saying that we will look beyond our fear and look out into a world that needs us. We are saying we will live as Jesus taught his followers to live. We will participate in building the kingdom of God on earth. We will reach out in love to all in need. We are saying yes, count me in – "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." One minister I know explains it this way: when we participate in the Lord's Supper we are agreeing to be moved from the inactive file to the active file. We are saying yes to God's peace and God's power for even our lives.

And if you are not sure what all of this means for your life or what you should do, I offer this prayer: St. Francis' Prayer for Peace: *Lord make us instruments of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.*

Amen.