

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter
April 23, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, IA 52101
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First Reading: Acts 2:14A, 22-32; Psalm 16; Second Reading: 1 Peter 1:3-9;
Gospel: John 20:19-31

Beloved of God,

Grace and peace to you from our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is the second Sunday of Easter, and I would guess that by now most of the goodies in the Easter basket have been eaten, the guests have gone home, the lilies are fading, and nobody is interested in eating any more leftover ham.

But in the church we are not done with Easter. We continue to sing and shout our Alleluias. We praise the Risen Christ in our hymns and in our liturgy. As Pr. Amy encouraged us last Sunday, we keep practicing resurrection. We claim that joy, even though we have considered all the facts.

The mood of the Gospel reading for today is a bit different than last Sunday. The great joy of Jesus resurrection has been told to the disciples, but instead of running into the streets to announce this good news, they are hiding behind locked doors.

They've locked themselves in a room, scripture tells us, because they are afraid of the Jews. That makes perfect sense since the authorities may very well have wanted to do away with them in the same way they did away with Jesus.

But I think that the disciples were suffering more than just fear. They were also suffering deep grief. The One to whom they had dedicated their lives – who had loved them so passionately and taught them so wisely, had suddenly been torn away from them. His death had completely knocked them off their feet. And mixed in with their grief, was the guilt and shame of having betrayed him. They had failed Jesus. They had denied him and abandoned him to die alone so that they could save their own skins. As darkness fell on that first Easter day, it was not only the doors to the house that are locked, their own hearts were locked as well.

In spite of those locked doors, and the guilt and shame of their failure, Jesus finds a way to reach them. Suddenly he is there in their midst. I imagine there was a brief moment of terror for the disciples – because one thing we know from all of the accounts of the Risen Jesus is that it's really difficult to recognize him at first. He appears to be a gardener, a fisherman, a fellow traveler, maybe a ghost. But Jesus chooses to reveal his identity to them by showing them his wounds – his pierced hands and side.

Jesus does not come in power and might and flashes of glory, but in the vulnerability of his broken body. Jesus speaks gently to them and offers them Peace – Peace to melt the fear and shame and guilt that holds them bound. And according to John's telling of the story, he breathes on them the Holy Spirit, and sends out in his name.

That's what happens on Easter. The second half of the story takes place a week later – on the “second Sunday of Easter.”

What's surprising to me here is that nothing seems to have happened during that intervening week. There are no scriptural reports of the disciples leaving that locked room to go out and announce the good news. They've seen Jesus, they've received the Spirit, they been given a commission, but they are still stuck. The doors to the house remain locked and their hearts remain closed. What that says to me is that the disciple's realization of what Jesus' resurrection means for them doesn't take place in a single moment – but unfolds over time.

So Jesus comes to them again. He doesn't scold them for their inaction, or reprimand them for their continued fear. His words to them are Peace. And while this time it's Thomas's turn to see the Risen Christ – make no mistake about it - they all need to see Jesus just as much as Thomas does. They all need to be moved out of hiding in the light of the new day. They all need to open the doors to their hearts, so that they can fully receive the love and peace and mercy that Jesus brings.

I am deeply touched by this story because it shows me how very human the disciples were – hiding behind locked doors, stuck in their grief and fear and failure. I know what it feels like to be in that place – living in a kind of physical, spiritual and emotional lock down. I would guess that many of you may know that experience as well.

Five years ago, my 16 years of service as pastor at First Lutheran came to an unexpected end. I was filled with grief at the loss of my faith community, and with guilt and shame in what felt like an irredeemable failure. I retreated into our house so completely that people actually thought I had moved. It felt like the end of ministry for me.

But it wasn't. And that's the other reason I love this story, because it reminds me so powerfully that even the most painful endings in our lives are always subject to the power of the resurrection. It proclaims to me that there is nothing that can stand in the way of God's life-renewing love and mercy in Jesus Christ. Not locked doors, or fearful hearts, or crippling grief, or the guilt and shame of failure. Jesus just keeps showing up. He keeps coming to his disciples, in his brokenness and vulnerability, offering them his body, blessing them, filling them and sending them out.

That is the pattern of resurrection living – a pattern we participate in every week. We gather here in our own brokenness and vulnerabilities, bearing on our hearts the marks of grief and fear and failure. And Jesus comes to us, offering us his broken body. When we open our hearts and hold out our hands – we receive the perfect love that casts our fear....the peace which passes all understanding....the life which never dies - Jesus own body and blood broken and shed for you, for me, for all.

Amen.