

Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Give me Jesus. That's the refrain, and the title, of an African American Spiritual that's in our hymnal. We haven't sung it here at Grace for several years now. I looked it up. But if I had written this sermon a month ago when we were picking the hymns for today, I might have chosen it for our hymn of the day, because as simple as it is, it sums up very nicely not only the point of today's Gospel reading, but the point of the whole Gospel of John, and actually, also the point of the entire New Testament and the mission of the church – our reason for being; the central task of our weekly gatherings and everything else we do as a Christian congregation. Give me Jesus. In the morning when I rise, in the dark of midnight, at the break of day, and when I come to die... give me Jesus. "You may have all the rest. Give me Jesus."

Today's Gospel reading is the same one we get every year on the second Sunday of Easter. It picks up right where our Easter Vigil Gospel reading left off, with Mary Magdalene announcing that she had seen the Lord. Now Jesus appears also to the other disciples, and finally to Thomas. This is the original ending of John's Gospel, John's original epilog in which he tells us why he wrote all this down. I'll get to that in a few minutes, but first, I want you to notice the three things that Jesus does for the disciples here, because they are the same things Jesus does for us when we gather in his name.

To help us do that, let's set the scene. The disciples are gathered together on the evening of the resurrection, behind locked doors. Some of them at least have witnessed the empty tomb. Some of them, at least, have heard Mary's account of meeting the risen Jesus. And yet here they are, hiding out in fear. Jesus' resurrection has not touched them. They don't know what to do with what they've heard and experienced. They clearly don't believe that Jesus is risen just on account of Mary's testimony. John doesn't tell us, like Luke did, that the men thought the women's report was an "idle tale." But you can infer that here from their lack of faith. This is what Jesus walks into, and he does three things.

The first thing he does is simply show up. He shows up, in their midst, extends his hands, and says, "peace be with you." And he's actually repeating himself here. He's said these words before, three nights earlier on the night of his betrayal. "Peace I leave with you," he told them then. "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Well, that doesn't seem to have taken, does it, because they are still troubled and still afraid. So here he is, doing it again. "Peace be with you."

The second thing he does is to breath the Holy Spirit on them. John doesn't have a Pentecost account. That's only in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts. But Jesus in John talks a lot about sending the Holy Spirit on his disciples so that they will not be "orphaned" after Jesus departs to the Father. This right here is John's version of the Pentecost. He gives them the Holy Spirit who will comfort them, advocate for them, and lead them into all truth.

The third thing he does is to send them with a mission of forgiveness, and not only a mission, but the authority to carry it out. If they forgive anyone, they're forgiven, he says, as if God had done the forgiving Godself. He also says, "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained," and that has sometimes been taken as another special authority given to the church – to *not* forgive. I don't think that's what's going on here. I think that this is actually a reinforcement of the task of forgiveness. There's a lot of forgiving that needs to be done, Jesus is saying here. Be confident that

when you forgive, it's done. But also know that this is an urgent matter. If you don't forgive, then the forgiveness isn't happening, so for Christ's sake, make sure you forgive sins and don't retain them.

The rest of the reading is the Thomas story. Thomas wasn't there at Jesus' appearance to the larger group of disciples. They tell him about seeing the risen Jesus – seeing the marks in his hands and side. But Thomas doesn't believe them. Now they get a taste of what Mary might have experienced when they didn't believe her. Then Jesus comes again, Thomas gets to experience what the others did, and then he gets to be made an example of. I wish Jesus had extended that example to the rest of the disciples, and even to Mary, because as you know, I think Thomas gets a bad rap. All of them had had a hard time believing Jesus earlier promise that he “is the resurrection and the life.” None of them expected the tomb to be empty. None of them expected to see Jesus again. All of them could not believe in Jesus' resurrection until they saw him with their own eyes. All of them believed only when they saw. And that leads Jesus to turn his attention to us (as I mentioned to the children): “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

The disciples' encounter with Jesus on the day of his resurrection is a paradigm for our gatherings here each Sunday, each resurrection day. And it has even more force today, of all days of the church year. Last week we gathered to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. Now it's week later, and we're gathered here once again. Kind of like in this Gospel reading, no? What has changed for the disciples from the one week to the next? How much has Jesus' resurrection impacted their lives? What was the nature of their faith now, a week later? Why are they still behind locked doors? Are they still afraid of the Judeans, of the Romans? Same questions for us. We have celebrated Jesus' Resurrection. We have belted out those great Easter hymns. We have shouted our Alleluias. What has changed for us in the past week? How much has Jesus' resurrection impacted our lives? What is the nature of our faith now, a week later? Like the original disciples, we need Jesus to show up again, here in this place, to give us his peace, to breathe the Holy Spirit upon us, to forgive us, and to send us with his forgiveness and love back into the world of our daily lives.

And that, dear sisters and brothers in Christ, is just what we get. Everything that Jesus does for the disciples in today's Gospel text is what Jesus does for us week in and week out in our resurrection-day gatherings. First, he comes among us, as he promised to do whenever we gather in his name. That's right, our weekly gatherings around word and sacrament “give us Jesus.” (You thought I'd forgotten about that hymn I started with, didn't you?) Jesus is here among us, sharing his peace with us. We are explicit about that. Every week before communion I say, “the peace of Christ be with you.” I'm giving you Jesus. Here he is. And then you turn to those around you and give *them* Jesus. “Peace be with you.” That's what sharing the peace is all about. It's not the time for a friendly greeting. That's what the narthex is for. Nor is this our own peace we're sharing. It is Christ's peace and Christ's presence that you become a delivery method for as we prepare to touch and taste and see him in the sacrament of his body and blood. The second thing we get is the Holy Spirit, with whom we have been sealed in Holy Baptism, and who is present and active whenever we proclaim the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection for us and for our salvation. When the gospel is proclaimed in the liturgy, in the hymns, in the readings of Scripture, and even, let us hope, in the sermon, then Holy Spirit gets to work, creating and sustaining in us the faith that the disciples so struggled with. Finally, we are sent on a mission of forgiveness and love, having received Jesus and his forgiveness in word and sacrament. Jesus Christ is given to you here today, dear people of God, right here, right now, and every time we gather. May God grant us grace by the power of the Holy Spirit to trust that life-giving promise, and to proclaim with our lips and with our lives the life-giving good news that Christ is risen! Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!)