

Resurrection As Relationship

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April 8, 2018. Christians are a diverse group, but we are all gathered together in the risen Lord's offer of peace, wholeness, and newness. For us, the resurrection is more an experience than something to be proved. Pastor Keith discusses this idea today, and suggests that maybe the resurrection is not about something to believe, but about the someone who makes believing possible.

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Well we reflect further on this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's quite an assortment of people and emotions who gather in that Upper Room with Jesus after the resurrection. There are those who had deserted him, those who had denied him. Some had watched him die from a distance. Some watched him die close up. There are folks in that group maybe who came to see an empty tomb. One of the people there believed right away, and one was confused by what he saw. So there were all kinds of people together. But they all seem to be fearful. The doors are locked tight. After Jesus appears, there is joy and there's testimony, as they can tell one another what they've seen, and they now believe that indeed he is the one risen from the dead. But in the midst of all this, especially between the two weeks when they meet, there is the skepticism of Thomas, who had not been there to see what the others had seen. There are so many different emotions, moods, reactions, impressions. Yet all are gathered together in the embrace of our risen Lord's offer of peace, wholeness, and newness.

This really is a picture of the resurrection community: all kinds of distinctive and diverse people, bound together in the promise of the resurrection in such a way that the whole is larger than the sum of its parts. As Christians gathered together, they believe in the resurrection and coming together that makes them bigger than what each one could do. So we may talk today about that very early Christian community, gathered around the resurrection. But that is who we are today. We all gather, having had that death and resurrection in common of Jesus. Yet we're all different: in who we are, how we are moved by the resurrection, and how it has an impact on what we do each and every day. And so we come together on Sundays, the day of resurrection, to gather ourselves and to remember what we hold in common — and then to go into our activities during the week mindful that we have this community of people gathered around the risen Lord to sustain us. We come together on this first day of the week, as did the early disciples.

In the last decade, an insight of professor Sandra Schneiders has changed some thinking about part of this passage we heard today. We heard the verse read that Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." And that's often been troubling to people: what do we do with this retention of sins? But looking more carefully at the original Greek writing of this verse, she has noticed that the word "sin" really isn't there in the Greek in the second part of the verse. And so in her view it's not really accurate to say, "If you retain the sins of any, they are retained," because the word "sin" isn't there. She also has noticed that the word that we use for "retain" can also mean "hold fast" or "to embrace" someone. It's not just to keep in your mind, but to come close to someone. So with this in mind, the verse translated would be more like this to her mindset: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; and anyone you hold fast is embraced and is held fast as well." So anyone who is close to you is someone you hold onto.

And so when we think of Thomas in this case, the verse means something more like this: "If you

forgive someone who has struggled to believe, they are forgiven; and if you hold fast anyone who is struggling, that person will be held onto and not let go of, nor lost or abandoned." So Thomas is there, someone struggling. But the disciples don't diss him. They don't do anything bad to him. They embrace him and say Thomas, come in here and come and see, and this will make sense to you. And so this seems to be a sensible way to look at this passage in the light of Thomas. Even though he questions the resurrected Jesus, he's not criticized by them or shunned or excluded. They include and retain him, hold onto him, until he has his own encounter with Jesus the next Sunday. It makes sense to think that this is what John wants for all of us. John, the gospel writer, wants us all to be able to forgive each other, to hold onto each other, to embrace each other — especially when we struggle — until we are caught up with the common experience of the risen Christ ourselves and share that in our community of faith.

Perhaps this experience of the disciples starting so fearfully, not judging each other but thinking about what the resurrection means for them, describes who we are as we gather on Sunday. We are a diverse group of all kinds of people who will hold onto each other and retain and embrace each other, especially when we struggle, until we are caught up in the experience of the risen Christ — and we do that together. And it helps us hold up and support one another.

We see here that this resurrection thing is more of an experience than it is a proof. Thomas was looking for his own encounter with the risen Jesus. He wanted to see Jesus alive again, so he could be assured that the promise of his relationship with Jesus would never be taken away. And Thomas helps to see that this resurrection, then, is experienced in different ways. It's more than a scientific proof that Jesus is alive or that the resurrection happened. There's no proof for that. Rather, the resurrection is among us, whether we see it or not. It's in the midst of us, whether we're able to point to it or not. When we're looking for the proof that it happened, we've missed the point. The truth is that it isn't *something* to be believed, but *someone* who makes the believing possible. And that *someone* we are talking about is someone who sees believing in terms of relationship, and who creates community through relationships. By the rising of Jesus, we know that we might have relationship with God and with one another and have life, and have it abundantly.

When we see resurrection as relationship, then we begin to see our lives in terms of what we saw described in our first lesson today from Acts. Life in the name of the resurrection looks like what Acts describes. Here were the Christians gathered together of one heart and one soul. That can be us. We live together with no one claiming any private possessions, but all having things in common. We can be free to give testimony to the risen Lord and to receive God's grace. We're able to live without anyone being needy in our midst. We're free to lay our possessions at the feet of the church leaders and have it distributed as any had need. That was the lifestyle in the beginning of Acts. That's seeing resurrection as a relationship. While we may not do all those things in that way, we too are free to lay our possessions at the foot of the altar, to say these are the things I want to share with the world and the people around me. When we see resurrection as relationship, we know how good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity, as our Psalm proclaimed today. And we know how we strive for fellowship, as our second lesson mentioned as well.

Seeing resurrection as relationship, it becomes a way to measure what we do in life. Our life in faith becomes a lifestyle for us. It's a way to live in a world where we can live simply and non-violently, in a shared style and in a loving style. It's not so much belonging to a certain organization called the church, but a way to live — even though we have membership and we'll be celebrating that today. But it's a group of people, it's a community. Not so much: are you on the rolls or not? How will our way of life help the world to come and believe, is what we want to ask as we live in this lifestyle of the resurrection. What will we help the world to see? Will the world be able to see the resurrection in each

one of us, in all that we do, and all that we say? Then *seeing* what we do will be the way to *believing* for them.

This past week there was a lot of recognition of the 50th anniversary of the violent death of Martin Luther King, Jr. And as they remembered that event, most of them played the highlights of his speech in Memphis, where we heard that brief section from his very famous speech: "I've been to the mountaintop. I've seen what we need to see, and that inspires me to live the life I live." That speech is based on his own religious experience of seeing something God had put before him. The disciples were seeing Jesus. Martin Luther King, Jr. saw and had another kind of vision of what God meant for him. I've mentioned other times this spring how what he saw led him to do things in his life. Seeing this vision of God is what inspired his faith and action.

It's generally believed there were probably only a few hundred people who saw Jesus alive after the resurrection, yet thousands and millions have come to follow him. They obviously didn't see it with their own eyes, as we haven't ourselves. Yet Jesus has spoken to them and been heard in the voices of others, and been seen in the lives of others, which has inspired so many to believe. Through what we have seen in the faith lived out by others, and as we have heard the words of Jesus passed on through those others, we live as though we have seen Jesus too — because we have. We've seen him in the modeling and inspired lives of others. We've heard the words of Jesus to start with. We've had the witness to him. So now we join others to live out this resurrection, and he now lives through us, in this congregation, and in the world.

Three times in this reading Jesus says, "Peace be with you." He comes to us and presents himself to us as the one who is alive to give life to us. It's not to be a fearful thing, but it is something that gives peace. He's come to give his life for us. Indeed, to know that Jesus has risen — and risen for us — gives us peace. It takes away our stress and our fear about living well enough. It gives us the freedom to live out the resurrection in the world around us. With this peace, like the peace of having a mountaintop experience with Jesus, we're able to live boldly in the world and to live with hope in the world. It's the one who was killed and then rose to life who urges us on. With him as our faith leader, we can live with peace, and live out the joy and the promise of the resurrection. Amen.

And now may the peace and joy of our Lord Jesus Christ, that passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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