

Second Sunday of Easter (Year A) – April 27, 2014
Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-3
By The Rev. Kevin Bean

Easter: Loosing the Bonds – Being Freed to Follow Again

Eastertide—this fifty-day season—often gets short shrift in comparison with other liturgical seasons, since it is so easy just to conflate the joy (and seriousness) of Easter into just one day—or to correlate Easter just with the promise of warmer weather, daffodils and the rites of spring. Yet in many other places, especially in Earth's southern hemisphere just before winter arrives, Easter's arrival is probably associated more with darkness, rain and cold. In such places, the resurrection symbols of light and new life seem starkly out of context. And yet, isn't such an unlikely association what Easter is about? Life bursting out of a cold sealed tomb, joy coming in the morning when weeping has spent the night, a cold heart warming from the inside out, being freed from the frozen confinement of our fears and stuck places and all that ties us in knots?

Today we encounter the disciples cowering behind locked doors and resigning themselves to the cruel fate of Jesus' death. It's no wonder the bewildered disciples are huddled together seeking support after the terror of the previous few days in Jerusalem. Jesus had received a brutal and tragic end, and it could just as easily have happened to them. The doors were shut for fear of the authorities. They had closeted—entombed—themselves behind locked doors motivated by their fear, dreading the suffering that might await them. Accomplices to insurrection hardly ever avoided the punishment of their ringleader. Would they be caught and crucified like Jesus? Where was Pilate? What was Caiaphas up to? When would the Roman centurions break down the door?

Besides their fear, they also huddled together filled with that nauseating, anxious, heart-pounding feeling that ensues when there is such a radical discontinuity between what was expected, and what actually happened.¹ After all, the Kingdom of God was supposed to have come—on earth as it was in heaven, when the disciples and Jesus entered Jerusalem for the final Passover. Sure, Jesus had said to them that he must suffer and die—and on the third day rise again—but the denial from the shock of events that ensued overcame the disciples. The Kingdom not only had *not* come, but its most fervent and articulate spokesman had died in what had appeared to everyone to be a cursed, godless death. And they were scared.

Fear and anxiety weren't the only feelings that led them to cower behind locked doors. There was also grief and remorse. They had loved and lost—and probably concluded, contrary to conventional wisdom, that it was worse than never having loved at all. Why had they followed Jesus so impetuously in the first place? And why didn't they have a bit more courage to stand with Jesus instead of running away? Why hadn't the Kingdom come in the way they had hoped for? How had they been so suggestible, so gullible? Could the whole Jesus episode be written off as temporary insanity? Why on earth had they left their families and walked away from their businesses? Why had they

left lifelong friends? For this? To huddle together in a locked room of sorry, fearful fugitives?

They were entombed in fear, grief and remorse; locked up in failure and self-pity. Any of us could be in that room, too. It's a room we all know, one way or another. It can be a room closed in by our fears and remorse, or by our failings, prejudices, our grudges or discontents, or just by the predictable, lonely or stuck routine of our ordinary lives.ⁱⁱ

Our lessons throughout Eastertide – these 50 days of Easter – speak of people meeting and being changed by the Risen Jesus. Easter marks the renewal of discipleship. It began with fear, grief and remorse, disbelief and doubt, and then awe-struck wonder and joy; and finally movement, out on the road – many roads – with the disciples transformed into powerful apostles. Resurrection is comforting, but also profoundly unsettling, because it is both an overturning of reality as we know it, and an entrance into what St. Paul described as dying and rising in union with Christ—a new act of creation. Presently we know how unsettling that feels. It is easier for us to remain anxious and despairing about our lives in the midst of intractable conflicts and wars, a troubled economy, and a polarized political climate. It is easier to be trapped in a stuck situation or a feeling of inevitability than to break free. It is easier at times to feel like a victim than to take responsibility for ourselves, for and with others, and for the world. It is quite simply easier to play dead than to act alive!ⁱⁱⁱ

As we see in today's gospel, the Risen Christ forces an unflinching honesty about our shortcomings and stuck places, and then opens the way to renewal and restoration and a new freedom to respond to the call to follow Him. And so we follow, and fail and fall, and follow again.^{iv} Jesus' Resurrection puts forward a choice between living a constricted, fearful and self-preoccupied life on the one hand, and living a life in the freedom and newness of the Risen Christ on the other hand. That is not to say that confronting the Risen Lord may prompt as many fears as it calms. The early community of disciples was shaken to its roots as much by Easter as by Good Friday. For the Living God not only raised Jesus from the dead, but occasioned a new thing in them to begin again. Christ's resurrection promises our own resurrection – and not just in our afterlife or on some final day – but here and now, enabling us to encounter within ourselves that fear of changing from the supposed “security” of our own constricted vision of life and its old habits, old illusions, old grievances, old sorrows.^v

For the disciples in our gospel reading—and for us today—the change from the entombed room of fear or remorse to resurrection and freedom comes through forgiveness. “Forgiveness”—there are *nine* different words for this word in the Bible. These words literally mean “to loose from bondage,” “to untangle the knots within,” “to return from exile,” and “to come home.” In our gospel, on Easter evening, Jesus breaks into the locked room and greets them with “Peace be with you,” and leads them from their entombment, their fearful and remorseful exile, to a new place. And this happens as Jesus breathes on them, declaring, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” literally the Holy Breath.^{vi} What the disciples receive in this sacred breathing is the power to receive forgiveness and to forgive. This is the miracle of Easter for us, that whatever is bound,

tangled up in knots, entombed, locked in or out, exiled, can be loosed, resurrected, liberated, opened or brought home through the Risen Christ's forgiveness, and our own.^{vii}

In us, the change from entombed fear to resurrected freedom also comes through forgiveness. Easter proclaims that forgiveness—Jesus' forgiveness—is offered to all. Just think: all the rulers of the world are forgiven, and all corporate and religious leaders, too; even church people, including the clergy who frequently have God in their mouths, but not so often in their hearts. All are forgiven...though, what does that mean? It means, as William Sloane Coffin put it, "that we are relieved not of the consequences of our sin, but of the consequences of being sinners."^{viii} Yet, without *exercising* forgiveness, we "retain the sins" and we hold each other *bound*. And without *accepting* forgiveness, we cannot be free. Of course, there are certainly good reasons why we may be unable to offer one another the gift of forgiveness. It is anything but easy. And if the wounding or the violation is of significant proportion, healing takes a long, long time. Nor is forgiveness given casually as though the violation never occurred or was rightfully inflicted. Genuine forgiveness cannot flow from one who thinks of himself or herself to have been deserving of victimization; nor can it come from one who lightly excuses a victimizer. Rather, forgiveness is most authentically given and received when injuries are acknowledged for what they *are*, and those involved know themselves to be capable of both injuring and being injured. Forgiveness bridges chasms and can reconfigure and even restore relationships from a new starting point—not so that they repeat the past, but so they can initiate a new future. At the least it can allow the one who forgives, or who is forgiven, to loose their own bonds and live life in a new way, no longer with the identity of being the offended, forgotten and discarded victim—or the Offender—whether or not reconciliation and restoration is reached with the other, which many times cannot happen.

But the resurrection is about forgiveness. The Risen Jesus gives the disciples the ability to receive and to give forgiveness. It is sometimes as difficult to believe our sins are forgiven, or that we can forgive others, as it is to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. But both are true and the reasons we are gathered here. And so, with the zeal of gratitude for such forgiveness wrought by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we can become much more the people we are intended to be by God, just as Peter became, after Easter, much more the person he was before Easter.^{ix} And so it means instead of trying to prove ourselves endlessly, we can express ourselves as fearless yet vulnerable, dedicated, joyous followers of our risen Lord. To live into Easter, then, is to embrace and proclaim and rejoice in the Risen Jesus who still encounters and forgives, and calls and empowers us to participate in his healing and justice-seeking work of restoring relationships and repairing the world. The poet Wendell Berry suggests that a life marked by the Resurrection is a life led against the grain. In his poem, "Manifesto," Berry writes, "...every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world...Love someone who does not deserve it....Practice resurrection."^x Amen.

ⁱ Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre described "Nausea" as the anxiety that accompanies the "radical incoherence of reality"—something like what the disciples were experiencing. See Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1964)

ⁱⁱ Then there was Thomas, called the Twin, whom I like a lot, perhaps because I know him pretty well, this twin of mine, this twin of us all. He was absent from that room, absent and wary. Yet he too held shut the door of his own heart, for fear, for tough-mindedness, and for doubt that became his fame – Doubting Thomas. Though what Thomas did know was how to recognize Jesus—by his wounds, of course; as if to say again that you can't look for, nor see and touch the Risen One unless you can see the crucified one. The same crucified risen Lord extends his shattered hands to us and invites us to touch his wounds and connect to his woundedness today as he appears in the distressing disguise of the poor, the abused, the lonely, and appears in every form of human need, injustice and woundedness that the world is free to acknowledge and address - or ignore.

ⁱⁱⁱ We can stop playing dead only when we feel the fact that Jesus took the “sting” out of death. We still die, of course—but Jesus has defused death by being totally present to us in life. And by rising from death, Jesus has ransomed, redeemed, and saved all existence. He has harrowed and hallowed the hell of human history and declared that our past is usable. He has eaten our bread and drunk our wine and proclaimed our present is livable. And he has died our death and, as the Risen Christ, proclaims that we have a future. Easter has to do not only with one person's escape from the grave two thousand years ago, but also with the victory of “seemingly powerless love over loveless power” in all ages, including, and especially, our own. (See William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 70).

^{iv} Easter is God's answer to the question, “Do we live in a world where the past or present or future is beyond redemption, where our self-destructive patterns are inevitable and unbreakable, where the Love of God is ultimately vanquished and God's Power defeated?” Certainly this describes the world of Good Friday, the crucifixion, and is, by and large, our world today. In our world the bad overcomes the good, and humanity overcomes God, not in appearance only but in dreadful fact. Children (and other innocents) die and cannot be restored to life. Violence begets violence, and life is often consequential—we reap what we sow. In places like Gaza and Israel, Iraq, Syria, Congo and Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan we see victims' graves become the point of departure for the next series of killing in ongoing spirals of violence. But the fact of Resurrection says of all this: we are not inevitably nor ultimately lost; our world is being, and will be, repaired and restored; we can be redeemed—all of us—everyone and everything.

^v ...as well as our understandable responsibilities and routines that make our lives so predictable to the point that all this can entomb us, shutting out new life. We all have a tendency to revisit or even abide in those fixed places where we know we are entombed and where (if and when we imagine God's presence) we imagine God is also entombed. We look for God in these old places, not expecting God in the new. But again, Easter isn't a safe holiday. At the core of our faith is the unsettling fact of a God who cannot be constricted nor entombed but who is now loose in the world and in our own hearts continuing the Risen Christ's ongoing mission of restoration of our lives and repair of the world.

^{vi} This exchange of breath is significant here. The life force that gave them life to begin with and sustained them all along—their breath—is now re-infused with the life force that sustains the Risen Jesus. Only once in the New Testament does the Greek verb “to breathe”—“*emphysao*”—occur, and it takes place here in this gospel today. Just as God had breathed life into Adam in the first creation (Genesis 2:7), so now the Risen Jesus, the Spirit-giver, breathes out the breath of the second/new creation. As his holy air hits their lungs and the Apostolic Commission is given: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”—and just after he breathes on them, they are told, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

^{vii} As far as John's gospel is concerned, the power of the Spirit is interchangeable with the power to forgive and to receive forgiveness. And Jesus gives both away on the very day he is raised from the dead, to his followers locked up behind their own fears, guilt and remorse. The Resurrection is about forgiveness. On that Easter evening we see the Offended One calling the offenders home. Each time Jesus extends his peace in greeting, he shows his disciples his wounds. And at the same time that he extends his peace and shows his wounds, he breathes forth the Holy Spirit's gift of forgiveness. And so,

as the Risen Jesus extends his peace to his disciples, that peace is extended in a forthright confrontation with woundedness—his and theirs—and the need for forgiveness through which God’s peace and power come. To miss this point would be to miss the depth of this gospel.

Just as Jesus had done with Lazarus when he had called him out of the cave of death, the Risen Jesus calls the disciples forth from a locked morgue of fear and regret into the light and power of new birth and new purpose. It starts with their being freed from fear and regret by the forgiving presence of the Risen Jesus, and then restored in their capacities to a ministry of forgiveness that looses people from whatever binds them and calls the exiles home. God’s empowerment—our vocation—is for a purpose. The disciples are empowered to loose others from all sorts of hellish bonds, as Jesus had done for them behind the locked door moments earlier. The resurrection is about forgiveness in these broad terms for us as well. Today, the Risen Jesus calls all of us forth from locked rooms to the freedom of new birth and new purpose. We, too, are given this capacity, this power of forgiveness through the same Spirit of the Risen Jesus. It starts with our being freed from fear and remorse by the forgiving presence of the Risen Jesus, and being restored in our capacities to a ministry that looses people from whatever binds them and calls the exiles home.

^{viii} William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 72.

^{ix} “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” - St Catherine of Siena

^x Or as William Sloane Coffin put it, “Easter demands not sympathy for the crucified Christ but loyalty to the Risen Christ. The proof of Easter is not a rolled-away stone, but carried-away Christians. So rise up, O people of God!” - William Sloane Coffin, “Civic Responsibility in the New Millennium” in *Fellowship* magazine, November-December, 2000.