

Easter II Year B 2009

Texts: Acts 4:32-35

Psalm 133

1 John 1:1-2:2

John 20: 19-31

“the doors of the house were locked for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” John 20:20

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

I just hate when this happens. I just hate when throughout the week I know which reading I am preaching on and I sit down to write my sermon and the Holy Spirit shows up, laughing at me saying, “So, you think you are preaching on that reading do you! Sorry, but that’s not my plan.”

I was all set to preach on the Epistle reading this morning. All week I have been studying and praying and reading about the Acts of the Apostles. I was absolutely convinced that I was going to be preaching on community and how when the community comes together to live an Easter faith, a faith grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, that amazing things happen. I was all set to talk about when a community comes together and testifies to the power of Jesus, all is shared, the hungry are fed, the needs of the people are met so that, “there was not a needy person among them.”

I was all set to do this until about eight o’clock last night when I read a little piece that had been sent to me by a friend and fellow priest. All of a sudden I heard that cackling in my ear that always means the Holy Spirit is about to yank me up by my shorts and show me what I am really supposed to preach about.

So, today I am not preaching on the Acts of the Apostles, but on the gospel of John. It makes sense because until the disciples could believe and proclaim the gospel of the resurrection, all the things they did in Acts, could not and would not have been done.

John’s gospel takes place the evening of the morning of the resurrection. Mary has seen Jesus and testified to his presence and told the disciples

what Jesus told her to tell them. The Beloved Disciple believed, but Peter went back to the disciples and presumably didn't do a whole lot.

Peter and the rest of the disciples certainly didn't take Mary's testimony to heart because if they had, all the doors to the house would not have been bolted shut. All the followers in the house, and it was not limited to just the eleven, were cowering in fear. They were still trying to process what happened three days earlier. They were still in a state of shock, they were still trying to come to grips with the death of their savior. They didn't have the time to process what the resurrection was and what it meant for them.

We are given a window into their bewilderment. We are given one reason why the house was shut up tighter than a drum...they were scared silly about what might happen to them now that Jesus was dead. They had seen what Imperial Rome did to those that pointed out the empire's failings. They had seen the religious rulers collaborate with the Roman's to hand over Jesus because of the questioning and new teaching he brought to the people. They saw how one could proclaim peace and justice and die in the most violent and unjust manner.

Is there any reason why they shouldn't be scared? We would be. When our security is threatened, when we fear for our safety on any number of levels, the normal and expected reaction is to hide, to lay low until the danger passes, to not draw attention to yourself, to let no one know that you are there.

Since the shootings at Columbine, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University and the many, many others that have happened but have receded from memory and are too numerous to recite here, a new phrase has come into our lexicon. That phrase is "being in lock-down."

We all know what being in lockdown means, don't we? It means that something is happening that shouldn't be happening. It means that we stop doing whatever it is we were supposed to do, we go into hiding, we say nothing, do nothing, we live in a state of controlled panic, until such time as the "all-clear" has been given.

The disciples were in lockdown mode. They had no idea what to do or what was coming.

The friend that shared his musings with me last night wrote, “It seems that it is always fear that causes me to lock up and lock others out...when the fear is left unidentified it offers the opportunity to reflect on what it is I fear. What is it that causes me to huddle and hide as I muddle on?”

The disciples knew what they feared, at least on one level. We often times do not. We carry around inside ourselves a vague uneasiness with life. We wait for “the other shoe to drop.” We really do believe the old adage of, “if everyone around you is losing their head and you’re not, you really don’t know what is going on.” Sometimes this vague uneasiness yields to an overwhelming panic. Sometimes it is our heart and soul that gets locked up in fear of something different, for fear of something or someone, we do not understand.

When our heart and soul go into lock-down we cannot do the work Jesus gives us to do. When we close ourselves off, we shut out the opportunity that we are being given by God to do his work in the world.

But what we find in this gospel text is that no matter what barricades we put up, no matter how tightly we close off our hearts, no matter how tight the lock-down or how great the fear we have, Jesus can, and does, walk right through all those things. And the first words that Jesus says to us is, “Peace be with you.”

Peace, the peace that passes all understanding, the peace of the knowledge and love of the Lord God, the peace that is given to us from the power of the Holy Spirit...that is the peace Jesus promises us. Jesus doesn’t give us some vague peace to match our vague anxieties. Jesus gives us a very specific peace, a peace that we cannot come by until we rest in him.

There is a reason why the most common words in the Bible are “do not be afraid.” It is because we are very fearful creatures. We use our fear as a shield so that our security isn’t threatened. We take on the fear of the world, rather than the peace of God.

Gail O'Day, a noted New Testament scholar and expert on the Gospel of John writes, "The Easter Gospel turns the world upside down, but we (the congregation) lives out our lives in right-side up realities."¹ The resurrection gives us a new reality from which to operate. The resurrection shows us that nothing is ever as it seems.

An amazing thing happens with Jesus and his fearful disciples; the more their fear increases so does the grace that Jesus shows to them. His peace is proportionate to the intensity of their lock-down mode. What was true for them, is true for us. We are given his grace and peace.

Jesus' resurrection is the "all-clear" sign. We can come out of hiding, we can unbolt the doors to our hearts and souls, we can open up to others around us and to the opportunity that Jesus is giving us to be sent out into the world in his name.

In a few minutes we will praying a litany of healing. So often we only think to bring our physical ailments to the altar. So often we want to be healed biologically and medically, and there most certainly is a large place for that in the Church. Jesus was and is the greatest healer we have ever seen.

But, how often to we bring our fears to the altar? How often do we lay before God those things that are closing the doors to our hearts, and souls and minds and asked to be healed from them? So very often that is where we need to start.

As the sacrament of healing is offered, think about those things that keep you in lock-down mode, and receive from Jesus the "all-clear" message. Receive it as an individual, and let us receive it as the disciples did, in community. We need to lay before God, as the people of St. Matthew's, whatever it is that may be keeping us from living an Easter faith, living into the resurrection of Jesus and doing his work.

When we do this we will experience today the same peace that Jesus promised his disciples on that Easter evening so very long ago.

Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 2 eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor p. 405

