

The Mission of Peace

sermon digest

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John 20:19-22

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On this last Sunday of Easter, we turn to John's account of the evening of Easter Sunday. Here, however, John gives no indication that the events of early morning in the garden have taken place. The disciples, he says, are gathered behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews." Just as Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb "while it was still dark," the darkness of evening, fear and grief seem to be invading the hearts and minds of those gathered, freezing them in place and blocking any sense of hope and anticipation for the future.

Jesus' greeting is the polite, traditional greeting of the day: "Peace be with you." Repetition of the greeting seems to take it one step farther, recalling perhaps Jesus' promise during that last evening while they were at table: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" [14:27]. This peace, Jesus had told them then, was unlike the world's peace. Free of dependence on external circumstances, this peace would strengthen and sustain them even as they assumed Christ's mission and encountered the same hatred and persecution that he had encountered. "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid," he had told them then. "As the Father has sent me," he told them now, "so I send you."

Jesus meets his followers in the gathering darkness of evening, and, reminiscent of God's breathing the breath of life into humankind in the beginning and the moving of the Spirit (wind, breath) in Luke's Pentecost story in Acts, Jesus "breathes" on the disciples and commissions them. Freed from the slavery of fear, the disciples are sent out, in the words of Brian Pierce, "to leave the footprints of God's peace everywhere they go" [*Living Pulpit*, Oct-Dec, 2006, p. 4].

The blessing of peace becomes the mission of peace. Proclaimed throughout Jewish scriptures, peace (*shalom*) is the gift of God. More than just the absence of warfare or tension, it signifies fullness, wholeness and completion. It is the product of justice and righteousness. It is gift, and it is task. In Christian scriptures, it speaks to the peace that is found in Christ, which becomes then a peace that must become embodied in community. It is not about withdrawal and passive rest. In the words of Paul, it is the active role of one who has been reconciled in Christ taking up the ministry of reconciliation [2 Corinthians 5:18]. In the words of Ephesians, it is about a compassion toward others that springs from remembering one's own tormented experience of being alone and without God in the world [2:12]. In the words of First Peter, it is about the certain and ongoing command to "seek peace and pursue it" [3:11].

The peace of Christ is not a self-centered peace that stops short with merely finding some small measure of peace and comfort for ourselves. It is not a narrow peace that extends merely to the limits of *my* own peace of mind or to the limits of *my* family, *my* church, *my* nation. **No, the peace of Christ issues forth in mission, and it is a mission as wide and inclusive as the love of Christ.**

The movie *Hotel Rwanda* tells the story of Paul Rusesabagina, who during the horrors of the Rwanda genocide saved the lives of more than 1000 people by keeping them safe within the walls of his hotel. As the movie draws to an end, Rusesabagina is pictured shepherding passengers onto a bus that will take them to safety. When a Red Cross worker warns that there may not be enough room for all those he is trying to get aboard, Rusesabagina quietly replies, "There is always enough room."

Reflecting on Rusesabagina's words, L. Gregory Jones recalls a central theme of the gospel. Where voices of fear were always quick to call attention to the lack of "room in the inn" and the need to impose limitations, Jesus continually embodied the conviction that there was always enough room and plenty to go around—loaves and fishes to feed thousands, room at the table for unexpected and undeserving guests, a place for children, and hearts filled with overflowing generosity and compassion. "Just as exclusion, hatred and violence shrink our worlds, our imaginations and our hearts," Jones concludes, "so hospitality, love and forgiveness enlarge them" [*Christian Century*, March 8, 2005, p. 41].

And so it is with those who would serve the peace of Christ. Far from offering us a gated community where the pain and turmoil of our world can be safely kept at bay, Christ's ambassadors of peace know a strength that enables them to become something on the order of Henri Nouwen's wounded healer. Although they know all too well the pain of grief and loss, division and enmity, they open their hearts to the pain of other peoples, other nations and generations yet to come and give themselves to the work of peace.

And so we gather for worship this morning, naming in our prayers the people of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Gaza, Haiti, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, and Cuba. And we remember and commit every day of our lives to working on behalf of the hungry, vulnerable and oppressed.

With the disciples of so long ago, we find ourselves freed from the fear that trembles behind locked doors and go forward to proclaim and live the good news of resurrection and peace.