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Communion

“The Heart of the Resurrection - Forgiveness”

John 20:19 – 31

Text: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, so I send you.” . . . John 20:21b

Katie Schecter E-mailed me earlier this week that she is preparing a paper for a course in Seminary on the future of the United Methodist Church. Late Wednesday afternoon when the staff had a farewell dinner for Katie and Megan, we all chimed in with various comments, and if Katie is smart, few of them should find their way into her paper.

But the truth is for mainline Protestant Christianity today, the church can be a rather dark, depressing place. We have collectively declined in our membership by millions. Whereas in Africa Christianity is growing by 33,000 new adherents per day; in North America and Europe, Christianity is losing 8,000 adherents per day. Many worship in half-empty churches.

Of course denominations are frantically trying to stem this tide. You can imagine what meetings have been like when church leaders try to address this. For the most part it is assessing blame and pointing fingers:

- Our clergy should have worked harder.
- Our laity should have been more courageous and enthusiastic about winning others to Christ.
- We should have been more earnest about inviting outsiders to come into our church.
- We should have been more hospitable.
- We should have been more inclusive and welcoming.
- We should have . . .

This is not unusual. Let’s look at the church depicted in our text for today. Here, we get our first glimpse of the disciples gathered together after the resurrection – and it is not a pretty picture. The disciples, huddled in their fear are barricaded in a house with the doors bolted shut. They probably were blaming each other for what happened. In short, we see here the church at its worst – scared, disheartened and defensive. They are low in spirit.

This story is an appropriate text, therefore, on this Sunday which has been traditionally called “low Sunday” in the church. Compared to last week, there are not as many of us gathered here. This Sunday is not the great throng of Easter, but rather the “faithful few” on the Sunday after Easter.

But like us now and those 2,000 years ago, there is only one thing going for them: the resurrected Christ. In the final analysis, this is a story about how the risen Christ pushed open the bolted door of a church with nothing, and how the risen Christ enters the fearful chambers of every church and fills the place with new life.

For our own sake we need to examine how Christ accomplishes this. I think there are two points that might bolster our spirits.

1.) *The first point is Jesus greets them with a message of forgiveness.* In today's reading the first verse (20:19) sets the tone: the disciples are huddled behind locked doors out of fear. And then the resurrected Christ appears.

In my flights of fantasy, I acknowledge that it's a good thing I wasn't Christ (no additional comments from the peanut gallery needed) – or that you weren't Christ either. If I had been Christ, my first words to the disciples might have gone something like this: "Where were you people? All that I did for you – and look what you did when I could have used some help." "You call yourselves disciples? I had a fairly good view from where I was, hoisted up high on the cross to die, and I looked out into the crowds and I didn't see any of you! Where were you?"

There was plenty of blame to go around. They were all, every one of them, not just Judas, betrayers of Jesus in one way or another. They had all refused to believe what he said and they had all refused to obey his commandments and follow him.

But since I wasn't the one appearing to them as Christ, it is important to note that the first thing Christ said to them was, "Peace be with you." Christ stilled their dread of what He might say or do to them and He gave them forgiveness.

They couldn't believe it. These disciples who had been with Jesus every step of the way couldn't believe it was Jesus until the risen Christ held up His wounds for them to see. And then their fear, their blaming and guilt turned to joy as the disciples rejoiced when they recognized Him. Then Christ breathed on them giving them new life. Listen again to that wonderful verse, "He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; . . .'" (from John 20:22-23) He breathed on them just like God had breathed a world into being at the creation (Genesis 1).

It was an amazing moment. It is important to note, on the first "low Sunday," the very first thing that the risen Christ said to them was: "Peace be with you." In other words, "Don't be afraid, I forgive you." Imagine how Jesus' first words of forgiveness were received by the frightened disciples.

What does it take to be a Christian, a member of the "Easter people"? It takes forgiveness from Christ. Built right into the gospel, from day one, is forgiveness. No relationship with Christ is possible, no obedience to Christ should be undertaken, without first believing that Christ forgives.

Jesus walked up to people and one of the first things He says to them is, "Your sins are forgiven." Oftentimes they have not even been talking about sin or forgiveness. You

almost expect some of these people to say, “Who said that I was a sinner? Who said that I had sins that needed forgiveness in the first place?”

Jesus keeps extravagantly, preemptively, announcing forgiveness. Most of the people Jesus forgives never repent or say they are sorry for what they did or the way they have lived. Jesus forgives them.

And Jesus commanded us to be forgivers as well. Jesus told us that we are to forgive our enemies. When Jesus taught us the Lord’s Prayer, He did not encourage us to bring all of our aches and pains and needs before God in prayer. Rather, Jesus spoke of forgiveness, of forgiving those who trespass against us. He urged us to forgive those who betray and wrong us. And when Jesus hung on the cross, He looked down upon us and pronounced, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

And now on Easter evening, Jesus is practicing what He preached. His first Easter action is to return to his disciples and to forgive them for the way they deserted Him and all He stands for. Jesus forgives them perhaps because He knows that there is no way for them to be His disciples without constant forgiveness. Jesus forgives them because forgiveness appears to be the very nature of God.

2.) *Which brings us to the second point. If Jesus forgives us, Jesus can certainly tolerate our doubts.* It is a week after Jesus was resurrected. Thomas missed the first appearances. The disciples tried to tell him that they had seen Jesus resurrected from the grave. Thomas doubted their veracity. Just like we would. I mean, how many of you; after having buried a loved one, would believe when someone else told you they have seen them alive? Thomas is no different than any of us. We wouldn’t believe that a dead person could rise again. And Thomas tells the other disciples, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in His hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in His side, I will not believe.” But the other disciples are persuasive and a week later he joins the disciples in a locked room.

After the resurrection celebrated last week, now we’re back to looking for signs. If we are listening on a “low Sunday,” we might be thinking along with Thomas: “This cannot be true. I need proof.”

As we make our way forward in our faith journey, we search for assurance, some basis for faith and hope. In the midst of perseverance, struggle and doubt, we look for signs. The Gospel of John is masterful in telling us about the Good News through the signs of Jesus: turning water into wine, feeding the hungry multitudes, giving sight to the blind. And Thomas is perhaps the first of those in a long tradition of those looking for signs. Thus Thomas declares: “I will not believe unless I can touch the wounds in His body.”

And Jesus tells Thomas to let his fingers do the walking. Thomas touches the wound, and incarnation is joined to resurrection: a last and unexpected sign.

And then Thomas believes.

But what about our doubts? We don’t have the opportunity to stick our fingers in Jesus’ wounds. So Jesus asks Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen Me?”

and then follows the question with a blessing: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29)

There would, of course be generations of women and men who would believe – not because of experiences like those of Thomas, but because of the signs written in the Bible.

Jesus’ teachings always seem to be the opposite of our usual way of thinking. Not “if you see, you might believe,” but “if you believe, then you will see,” or, as St. Anselm expressed it, “I believe in order that I might understand.”

One of my favorite writers, Frederick Buechner puts it this way, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

Because we believe, we see. In faith, we seek understanding. Our doubts help us gain greater depth to our faith. We follow Thomas in faith, leaving behind Easter Sunday and embarking on a journey – a journey full of forgiven and accepted doubts and stumblings.

And the very good news, for this first Sunday after Easter, this Sunday when we hunker down with all of our failures, and all of our mistakes, all of our guilt and blaming, behind the closed doors of the church, the Good News is that we have a God who not only comes back to life on Easter, in the glorious resurrection, but who also comes back to His betrayers and gloriously forgives us. Therefore, we can go on. We can get out and go forward in our faith. We can follow Christ, because Christ will not let us be trapped by our failures.

Jesus gives us what we need to be his disciples. That night on Easter, when Jesus commissioned His first disciples, Jesus also commissioned us, and Christ breathes upon us with his Holy Spirit, and forgives us. Every step of the way, with each faltering, stumbling step that we take, Christ forgives us. That is the great resurrection message. Christ is risen! We are forgiven. We are forgiven indeed.