



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

APRIL 15, 2012

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

So I Send You

John 20:19-31; 1 John 1:1-7

Today is "Low Sunday," the second Sunday of Easter. We may think the term refers to the expected low attendance on the week after everyone gathered to celebrate Christ's resurrection. The term actually comes from the early Catholic tradition when the seven days of the great Easter Festival had ended, newly baptized neophytes were allowed to remove their white baptismal robes for the first time, and the Church settled into the somewhat more subdued observance of the remainder of the Easter season.

But it may seem that "Low Sunday" is an appropriate name for another reason. Just a week ago, we shouted, "He is risen!" while peals of the Easter bells filled the air. We adorned our cross with blossoms and ourselves with new frocks and lifted our "Alleluias!" for the first time in more than forty days. We filled ourselves with ham or fried chicken or chocolate or whatever else we had given up for Lent, and we basked in the glorious news of Christ's resurrection. Some of us even had the day off on Monday, allowing us to prolong the celebration one more day.

But by Tuesday morning, we had returned to the real world, and I suspect some of us were wondering whether anything had changed at all. By Tuesday morning, most of us made the same familiar trek to work or school, saw the same tragic news stories of violence and economic woes and heard vicious political rhetoric on television, and we juggled the realities of the same stresses and responsibilities that we had on Good Friday.

Just seven days ago, we proclaimed that Christ was triumphant over sin and death, but we still see the power of sin and death at work in our lives and homes and communities and world. Even as a people filled with the joy of our Resurrection faith, it doesn't take us long to recognize the gap between our Easter proclamations and the reality of grief and fear and guilt and need that threaten to destroy the tiny seed of faith that is in us.

I suspect the disciples knew exactly the disappointment that we feel. When the women came running from the tomb on that first Easter morning and began to share the unbelievable news of what they had seen, there must have been elation among them. Finally, the world would believe them! Finally, those who had mocked Jesus, those who had arrested him, those who had crucified him would see that he was who he said he was, and they would be vindicated. Finally, the fear and despair of the last few days could give way to joy and celebration! But then the realities that still existed around them quickly set in.

By that very night, they would be hiding out behind locked doors because they feared for their lives. Jesus had arisen just as he said, but instead of liberation and joy, it seemed the resurrection had brought even more demands and fears. The Temple leaders were eager to levy charges of blasphemy against any who dared to make claims about the

Son of God. The Romans stood ready to quash any treasonous talk of a new kingdom. Even some of their own were still reluctant to believe this wondrous, hopeful, life-changing news. The disparity between the hope and joy of Easter morning and their experience of what was happening around them seemed like a chasm that threatened to swallow up their fragile faith.

But John's Gospel tells us that in this very moment of despair, Jesus appeared. We often hear this text in light of Thomas' story. History has been pretty rough on Doubting Thomas, as many call him, but I'm not certain my response or yours would have been any different from that of Thomas, who simply asked for some evidence before he would believe the outlandish news of Jesus' resurrection. I think Thomas deserves our compassion, not our ridicule, as I am inclined to see his doubting faith as an honest faith.

Instead of focusing on Thomas in his doubt, the part of today's Gospel lesson that has captured my imagination is Jesus' initial encounter with the disciples in that locked house on the evening of that first Easter day. Other than Jesus' words of comfort and instruction to Mary Magdalene in the garden, we now hear the first words spoken by the Risen Christ to his disciples: "Peace be with you."

Perhaps knowing that the disciples would have difficulty focusing on anything other than their anxiety, Jesus spoke, "Peace." Or maybe in his desire to make sure his disciples recognized him, Jesus echoed words he had said on at least two other occasions in John's Gospel, just before his crucifixion, and he spoke, "Peace." Or perhaps in order to meet them where they were and fulfill their most immediate need, as Jesus had done for those he encountered throughout his ministry, in their moment of fear, Jesus spoke, "Peace."

It is significant that, just as he had done on those two other occasions, here Jesus associates this gift of peace with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Especially in John's understanding of Jesus' teachings to his disciples, the indwelling of God's Spirit would bring them peace, peace to overcome their fears and peace that would accompany them as they carry on the work he is about to assign to them.

One thing you should know about John—among the Gospel writers, he has the heart of a poet. John often writes in grand style, using bold symbolism and evoking powerful images. We hear that same poetry and grandeur in the words of today's epistle lesson, words written in the Johannine tradition: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1).

This Word of Life was now standing among his stunned disciples, speaking to them and extending the gift of peace through the Holy Spirit. At such an important moment as Jesus' first resurrection appearance, we should expect no less than dramatic words from John, and John does not disappoint.

In essence, what John tells us here is a new kind of creation story. Remember in Genesis when God fashioned humans out of lifeless clay, breathed the Holy Spirit into them and gave them power that had belonged only to God: the power to be co-creators with God, to create new life and to oversee all that God had created.

Here in John we see a kind of re-creation. Jesus appears among his followers who were lifeless, paralyzed by their fear, breathes the Holy Spirit into them, and grants them the ability to bring about new life through power that had previously belonged only to God: the power to offer forgiveness.

The power to forgive is the power to enliven souls made dead by the chokehold of sin. The power of forgiving sins is the power to restore relationships, to renew life, to bring about a new creation. The power of forgiveness is the triumph over sin and death. It is the power of resurrection. And to his followers, Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." He gives this commission to those disciples who had betrayed and abandoned him and who were now cowering behind locked doors. Yet he called and empowered them for the work that would offer redemption, reconciliation, even resurrection to the world. And he gives that same commission to us, who in our own ways have betrayed and abandoned him and continue to cower behind our own doubts and fears. Yet he continues to call and empower us for his work of redemption, reconciliation, even resurrection in places where sin and death appear to reign in our own time and place.

Today we recognize and celebrate the faithful response of one of our own who will soon go out to do the work of redemption and reconciliation to which Christ has called her. Sallie has heard the words of Christ saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," in her own life. Through the love and encouragement of her family, through the example and nurture of this family of faith, and through the many gifts with which God's Spirit has equipped her, Sallie will offer new life to children and families in one of Richmond's toughest neighborhoods. She will speak peace to young lives who have known violence and fear. She will offer resurrection hope in places that have been overcome by chaos and despair. We celebrate with her. We send her with our blessings and our prayers. And to honor the commitment she has made and the ways God will use her, we are called to make our own commitments this day.

Whether you are an elated and impetuous Mary, a doubting Thomas, or a disciple who is paralyzed by fear, God sends you. God sends you to be the voice of peace to the neighborhoods plagued by unrest. God sends you to be a reassuring presence wherever there is doubt and fear. God sends you to be the one who forgives sins, who creates new life, who offers restoration in the face of whatever destruction and hopelessness you encounter. God sends you, and God sends me, and God promises the gift of the Holy Spirit so that in moments of disappointment or disillusionment, in places of sin and death, we can have and we can offer new life in Jesus' name. Thanks be to God! Amen.

April 15, 2012

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

As we continue to celebrate your resurrection on Easter morning, we continue to celebrate our resurrection to new life day by day, O God. We have been reminded once again of the wonderful gift we have been given when we claim our redemption through you. We realize once again that we serve a God who is not relegated to legends, myths, and ethereal ideas. Instead, you have lived among us, breathed our air, eaten our food, and experienced our life. Above all, you have overcome sin and death and offered that same victory to us all. Thank you, Lord!

We pray that we will continue to follow the example of Christ and share this Good News with the world. In our homes, in our places of study and work, when we play, and when we shop, enable us to embody the grace of Christ and to exemplify his love to all whom we meet.

We are grateful this morning for the commitment Sallie has made to embody Christ among the children of the Church Hill community. We pray for her and for all her colleagues who will work beside her. We pray for the children and their families and ask that you bless them all with experiences that will be life changing. Use your vast creativity to transform the lives of children, interns, and adults to the extent that everyone who enters that community will know that Christ has been seen and touched.

Continue to touch us all, as well, O God. Touch us with your healing grace when we are ill. Touch us with your guiding grace when we are perplexed and face daunting decisions. Touch us with your comforting grace when the way ahead seems dark and dangerous. Touch us with your restoring grace when storms of all types bring devastation to our lives. Touch us with your redeeming grace when we have made mistakes and need to turn our lives around. Touch us with your joyous grace when we experience the goodness of life and love. Touch us with your grace and allow us to see Christ every day in our lives.

Make our joy complete, O God, and continue to fill us with resurrection light. Wake us up to the glory and possibilities of a new morning and walk with us into the world where we, too, may help others experience the touch Christ for it is in his name that we offer all our prayers. Amen.

Jody C. Wright
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