

Easter 2
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

John 20: 19-31

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

The gospel lesson this morning begins on the evening of Jesus' resurrection. Easter has happened. And with news like that, you'd think that the next scene should open with flowers and banners, shouts of "Alleluia. Christ is Risen" and responses of "The Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia." A rousing, brass-accompanied chorus of "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today."

But, the scene in today's gospel doesn't begin like that at all. Perhaps we only think that it should because we have heard this story so many times and we know the ending.

Just previous to today's Gospel reading, the reading we heard on Easter Day ended with Mary Magdalene's amazingly joyful words, "I have seen the Lord."

You see early that morning Mary, full of grief and despair, had gone to Jesus' tomb, the place where Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had laid Jesus' broken, bloody body after the crucifixion. And to her total surprise, she had found the stone that covered the entrance of the tomb removed.

Running to get Peter and the "disciple whom Jesus loved," she had brought them back to see this incredible sight. But, after confirming what Mary had seen, these two disciples didn't stay around to figure out what had happened. Instead, they "returned to their homes."

However, as we heard last Sunday, Mary Magdalene stayed behind at the empty tomb, heard Jesus call her name - Mary, and immediately recognized her dear teacher, her beloved friend – no longer dead in the tomb, but very much alive and standing right before her.

Jesus told her to go to his brothers – the disciples - and tell them that he was ascending to God. So, she went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.”

That’s where we come in today with this continuation of the story.

...it was evening of that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear...

There it is...no flowers, banners, acclamations, or hymns. Not anything like what we might have expected. Just a group of fearful disciples, huddled together behind locked doors.

Now, today’s text from the Fourth Gospel says that the disciples were locked away for fear of the Jews. But, we might have some doubts that “the Jews” were exactly what the disciples were afraid of. Heck, the disciples themselves were Jews!

This phrase “for fear of the Jews” probably tells us more about what was happening at the time the Gospel was written than about what was happening on the evening of the resurrection. For by the time this text was written sixty or so years after the resurrection, there were tensions between the emerging Christian community and the Jewish synagogues of which many of them had been members.

Tensions that were so severe they would have set up this harsh division between Christians, the followers of *The Way*, and the Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

But, even if these frightened disciples weren't locked away "for fear of the Jews," they surely had some things to be afraid of.

What if Mary Magdalene had been wrong when she her incredible claim about seeing the Lord? What if Jesus were not alive again? What if his body had been stolen as Mary suspected, and he was still dead? Then, they must have felt abandoned, isolated, alone, sad, and afraid of the Jewish authorities who had been complicit in Jesus' death.

Or, what about the Roman authorities? They had executed Jesus because he was perceived to be a threat to the Empire. Wouldn't they be looking for his followers? They would surely be considered dangerous to the Empire, too. And, if they were considered dangerous to the Roman Empire, then the disciples should have been afraid, very afraid indeed.

And, what if Mary were right and Jesus was alive, walking around and looking for them? These were people who had pretty much all deserted Jesus as he faced the Roman authorities, torture, and the cross. Peter had outright denied him, not once but three times.

Perhaps they were afraid of seeing this one who they had let down so miserably. They might have expected that he would look at them with grave disappointment or even worse with anger and retribution for their cowardice and disloyalty.

But then Jesus appeared to them – coming right through those locked doors of fear. And he said, “Peace be with you.” *Shalom*. He didn’t ask where they had been while he faced torture and death.

He didn’t look at Peter and say, “Why did you act like you didn’t even know me?”

He didn’t ask the disciples why other people, not his closest friends, had to prepare his body for burial.

And, he didn’t say to Peter and the one whom he loved, “Where were you? Why did you go home when you saw that my body was not in the tomb? Why didn’t you wait for me with Mary?”

He didn’t look at them with disappointed eyes or speak with anger.

No scolding. No criticism. No retribution.

No, he said, “Peace be with you.”

And, this was no ordinary greeting. It was the reassurance that they had absolutely nothing to fear from him or from anyone else. This group would become the church. And, Jesus knew that if they were to be the church, then they could not be afraid of anything.

Then, Jesus gave his fledgling church a commission, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Just as Jesus had become incarnate to show the world the Father, they were to show the world Jesus. Jesus was ascending to his Father, and he was leaving them in world. As he had been the total self-gift that made God known, now he was sending them out, to be to the world what he had been to the world.

Jesus was commissioning these disciples to go out and to be peace and love and justice for the world. Just as God had sent Jesus, so not Jesus was sending them into the world that God loved so very much.

But, Jesus knew all too well the frailty of the disciples. He knew that they needed the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit if they were to carry out this commission.

He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

It is almost a re-enactment of the creation scene in the second chapter of Genesis.

And he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit onto his disciples, those who would be the church, was the beginning of the new life of believers in the risen Lord.

Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to make his followers a community that would bring the joy and reassurance they had received on the evening of the first day of the week from the risen Jesus to later generations of frightened disciples. To bring God’s gift of the resurrection life to a world that desperately needs that gift.

Jesus' resurrection, the raising of a dead body back to life, began the miracle of Easter. The coming of the risen Christ to those who had deserted and denied him - his coming with a message of peace, a commission for them to be to the world what he had been to the world, and the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit, that was certainly the continuation of the Easter miracle.

Today, Jesus still raises his hand in benediction to his church, to those of us who are gathered here this morning, and blesses us, "Peace be with you. You have nothing to fear from the world or from me. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Be to the world what I have been to the world. Show them who I am. Receive the Holy Spirit, who will empower you to take the gift of new life I have given and give it to others."

Alleluia. Christ is risen!

The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia!