

## **EASTER 2 – C – 2010**

JOHN 20:19-31

Suddenly, Jesus appeared. And the first words out of his mouth were, “Peace be with you!” Powerful words to comfort the terrified disciples in the room. When someone was wished peace in Jesus’ time, it was much more than a greeting or a wish for the absence of conflict. Wishing someone peace was wishing them wholeness, healing, reconciliation and forgiveness.

The peace, the shalom of Jesus, was and is a deep, inner, spiritual peace that wells up from within the heart and spills out in life-giving ways to others. “Peace be with you” were and still are words of healing, words of love and words of forgiveness.

After his greeting, Jesus showed the disciples the marks of the nails in his hands and the wound from the spear in his side. Jesus knew how difficult it was for his friends to understand what the resurrection was all about – so he showed them the evidence of his death. And later Jesus again showed the marks of his crucifixion to Thomas.

And what did the disciples do? They rejoiced. They must have had quite a celebration. Then – Jesus commissioned them to carry on his work. Jesus reminded them that he and God were one and just as God had sent him, so he was also sending them out to do God’s work. And then Jesus breathed on the disciples, what I have heard called, the “hot, holy breath of God.”

Jesus breathed on them. He blew the breath of God’s spirit – the Holy Spirit -- on all those surprised disciples, empowering them to do the ministry he was calling them to do. For the writer of John’s gospel, this was the Pentecost – the birth of the church. And Jesus’ first directive to the disciples – to the new church -- was probably a surprise. Jesus told them, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Forgiveness of sins was the ministry these early disciples were being commissioned to do.

Who were they to forgive? I think that Jesus probably wanted them to begin with themselves – to forgive whatever part they had played in his crucifixion. And they needed to forgive each other. And then – they needed to forgive the others who were involved -- Judas, the religious authorities and the Romans. Can't you imagine the disciples muttering --- "This isn't going to be easy. It's really going to be hard work to forgive."

All of us who are here today may be thinking, "All this forgiveness stuff is great – for those early disciples – but what does this have to do with us?" Well, I'm here to tell you that you -- and me – all of us – are Christ's disciples. We are the ones that Jesus was talking about when he said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

We are Jesus' disciples and Jesus the Christ has commissioned all of us to the ministry of forgiveness just as he commissioned those disciples so long ago. We have been commissioned to forgive ourselves, our neighbors, family members, people in our communities, our nation and the world. And it's not easy. Forgiveness is hard work. And it's only by the "hot, holy breath of God" that we are empowered to forgive. Because God first loved and forgave us, we are empowered to love and forgive others. But all of us who have ever been involved in forgiving know how difficult it is.

In an old Charlie Brown cartoon, Charlie was trying to help Snoopy sort out a situation with Woodstock. Snoopy was lying on top of his doghouse trying to avoid the whole situation. Charlie says to him, "I have a suggestion." Snoopy responds, "Doesn't everyone?" Charlie doesn't hesitate to give Snoopy his suggestion. "Why don't you try to find out what it was that got Woodstock upset with you at his party? Maybe that would be the first step toward your reconciliation." Snoopy thinks for a moment, and then responds, "I always trip on that first step."

All of us are somewhat like Snoopy, we trip up on that first step toward reconciliation. It's hard to admit we may have caused some kind of hurt. We struggle with forgiveness. It's hard to get out of the cycle of hurting others and being hurt. It's hard not to hold a grudge towards others when they've hurt us somehow. Children are abused by parents who are

supposed to be trusted adults, husbands and wives inflict damaging remarks and sometimes damaging fists on each other. We throw racist and sexist remarks and jokes at those who are different from us and violence erupts. Nations go to war against other nations. The list of grudges and hurts go on and on.

Corrie ten Boom, the woman who wrote and spoke so eloquently of her time as a prisoner in a German concentration camp in World War II, told a pastor about not being able to forget a wrong that had been done to her. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident in over and over in her mind – and she couldn't sleep.

The pastor said to her, “Up in the church tower is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the bell ringer lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First, ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops.” The pastor went on to say, “I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming back for a while. Those thoughts are just the ding-dongs of the old forgiveness bell slowing down.”

Carrie then asked God for help in putting the past behind her. And if you don't remember another thing from this sermon, please remember this. We cannot forgive on our own power, it is only the spirit of God within each of us that empowers us to forgive and put the past behind us.

It's only by the hot, holy breath of God that we are able to forgive. We can't do it alone.

Many, long years ago, the holy breath of God enabled a group of huddled, frightened, grief stricken disciples to move forward into an amazing ministry of caring and reconciliation throughout the world. Those ministries continue to grow today because of you and me. We are Christ's disciples of caring, reconciliation and forgiveness in today's world.

And God continues to breathe upon us every day of our lives, filling us with new life, empowering us to go forth to share Christ's resurrection, his love and forgiveness with the world. My prayer for all of us on this second Sunday of Easter is that the peace and the reconciling, forgiving, love of Jesus will be within each of us now and always. And that each of us will be able to put true forgiveness and caring into action.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Sermon by the Rev. Jean Rogers

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Nogales, Arizona

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