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"The Spirit Connection"

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The Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; I John 1:1-2:2

The Easter story begins and ends in a tomb. It begins with the story of Jesus' betrayal and his execution by the Roman government. They laid his lifeless body in a borrowed tomb and rolled a huge stone over its entrance to seal it. There he lay for three days in the utter darkness of the tomb until resurrection dawned on Easter morning. Then, by the power of God's victory over death itself, the stone was rolled away and he stepped out of the tomb into the first light of day.

But that's not the only tomb opened on that first day. Besides the tomb where Jesus' body was placed, there was also the tomb where the disciples hid themselves. The disciples locked themselves in a room because they were frightened and the resurrection power had not given them the courage to tell the story of the Jesus to the world. They were paralyzed in their hopelessness and fear. They shut the door and locked it so they could buy themselves time in trying to understand what had happened.

That's where Jesus found them the evening of that first day alive from the dead. John's gospel tells us they were gathered together [all but Thomas] behind locked doors, when inexplicably Jesus stood among them. Imagine that, Jesus had to break out of one tomb and into another to get his message out into the world! Instead of followers who were brave and willing to speak about the wonder of what they had seen, they were a huddled, frightened group of men who were afraid to come out of hiding. Jesus had to go out and find them if he was to lead them to engage the world with his message. The way the story is told, Jesus emerged with the gifts of God for the people of God. In this honest Scripture, Jesus gives the fearful disciples four gifts for the journey they were about to take after he departed:

"Peace Be With You"

When Jesus appeared in the room with them, he said as he often did, "*Peace be with you.*" It was a message they desperately needed to hear and Jesus offered it to them generously. "Peace," it's a word that most of us come here needing today. Maybe it's peace of mind that you need. Perhaps you are confused and tired in your mind. You have been fighting battles on all the major fronts and you don't know which way to turn. Confusion begets confusion to those who are tired and weary. Most of us consider our souls to be the center of our being. It's the seat of your personality where all the hidden forces that shape your being are held. But the soul can become confused as well. Maybe you feel empty and spent. We live as if we

have no center to us and no core. Our values, which should provide a compass to guide us through difficult seas, are so uncertain that even we would have a hard time describing them if asked. Without a value system to guide us, we are adrift and powerless to chart our own course. Peace? For most of us, peace is something we daydream about but it is something we know precious little about. And yet, Jesus appeared among them with the promise of peace. Then he repeated it and said it a third time for emphasis. They were a group of people who were frightened and powerless and had locked themselves behind closed doors for protection. Jesus appeared and he had just the right thing to say, "*Peace be with you.*"

God-Breath for Power and Witness

But there is another thing that Jesus did for them when he appeared in the locked room. He breathed on them and promised they would have the power of the breath of God to empower them. Do you recall that the breath of God symbolizes the vitality of the presence of God throughout the Scriptures? Every time the breath of God is mentioned, something amazing and powerful occurs. God spoke and the world came into being. The breath of Jesus gave them energy to face the demands of the coming few days. Jesus made other appearances among the disciples that the four gospels and Acts describe for us and then he left them. But upon his departure, he promised the coming of the "breath of God" to come and live among them. Forty days later, as they prayed in the Upper Room, the breath of God blew in their midst and the Holy Breath filled them with the vital presence of Jesus so they had the power to go out into the world and preach the risen Christ to their world. The contrast was amazing. This was an absolute reversal of energy from the scared disciples of Easter and the empowered bold preachers that emerged on Pentecost.

The Power to Forgive

Third among the gifts given to the disciples on that first day after death, was the commission to go out and offer the gift of forgiveness to the world. John Claypool wrote, "The way of forgiveness is the way of gratitude and astonishment. It lets the past become our teacher rather than our judge." That's right, Jesus gave his followers the power to forgive and offer reconciliation. Jesus wanted the church to have the gift knowing we might not always be up to the challenge of dispensing the grace of forgiveness. That's the way forgiveness works for us as well.

Jesus told them they had the power to withhold forgiveness in the world but warned them of the effect it had for them in return. "*If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive theirs, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Matt. 6:14-15).

Acceptance of Our Beliefs and Our Doubts

When Jesus appeared to the disciples behind the closed doors of their tomb-like room, one of them was missing. We aren't sure where Thomas was at the time but he was definitely not among them when Jesus appeared. And true to his honest approach to things of the heart, he refused to believe unless he could touch the

wounds of Jesus. Thomas had certain irrefutable standards by which he would believe. He had what is known as "believer's doubt."¹ It wasn't enough that his best friends and colleagues had seen and talked to Jesus. It wasn't enough that their explanation for the mysteries of the faith were sincere and heart-felt because Thomas had his own inner convictions to sustain.

Consequently, Jesus' next appearance with the disciples a full week later included a confrontation with the missing doubter. Jesus knew Thomas was not one to be sucked into someone else's easy faith and that he needed to be reassured. So Jesus took the initiative and stood toe to toe with him and offered to him his own resurrected body for inspection. "*Do whatever you need to do to convince your heart that I am alive as they told you,*" he might have whispered to Thomas as they faced one another. "*Come and see for yourself,*" Jesus echoes throughout the centuries. Bring your best questions and test them to see if they have answers. If so, accept the gift of a faith that can be tested.

E. B. White wrote about watching his wife Katherine planning the planting of bulbs in her garden the last autumn of her life. "... there was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance ... the small, hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would yet be another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying of October, calmly plotting the resurrection." Writing about this faithful thinking, Robert Raines noted, "Katherine was a member of the resurrection conspiracy, the company of those who plant seeds of hope under dark skies of grief or oppression, going about their living and dying until, no one knows how, when or where, the tender Easter shoots appear, and a piece of creation is healed."

Our calling as Christians is to make sense of the resurrection and then to find committed ways of making the resurrection come alive in us. With gifts like these, we are to go out into the world, planting seeds of the resurrection to bring healing to the world.

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¹ See "Faith and Doubt After Easter," by David E. Anderson for a discussion of this concept; *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, PBS, 4/21/06, www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week934/p-exclusive.html