

Easter 2A (4/23/17)

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

Life is necessarily embodied. There's no way around the physical manifestation of our fears and hopes, our pains and joys. Even as we carry our distress in our bodies, the living Christ draws near and replaces it with his peace. Faith, in other words, grows out of a physical encounter with God's promise of abundant life, sustaining us beyond our anxieties.

Have you ever given extra thought to the handshake line after Sunday worship? It's a strange custom, isn't it? You're all headed toward the goodies or the restroom or the car, and there I stand, like a gatekeeper, expecting to make eye contact with you and give you a personal greeting. It's as if a brief moment of mandatory extraversion is the price of a cookie. I suppose it's akin to any sort of receiving line, the opportunity for a one-on-one connection in an otherwise group context like a wedding or funeral. It really is a privilege to have the chance to greet you individually, although you certainly don't need to feel obligated. But, what are we really supposed to say to each other in such a small window of time? *Good morning? Happy Easter? Go ducks?* Unless we're content with pleasantries – which I'm not – we need to say something brief but meaningful.

I've chosen to use the phrase Jesus uses to greet his disciples the first time he encounters them together after the resurrection: "Peace be with you." Notice that he says it three times in our Gospel from John today: once upon arrival, then again as he offers them the gift of the Holy Spirit, and finally a third time the following week

in the presence of Thomas. It almost sounds like a handshake line. *Peace be with you. Peace be with you. Peace be with you.*

The repetition of the phrase carries the risk of diminishing its value. If we say it enough times, it may start to sound like *Good morning* or *Happy Easter*, nothing more than a polite, slightly more pious-sounding hello. But, consider Jesus' reason for repeating his greeting. In spite of Mary's surprising news on Easter morning – "I have seen the Lord" – the disciples are skeptical. Although only one of them earns the title "Doubting Thomas," he is certainly not the only one who harbors doubts after Easter. The resurrection is too good to be true. How can they trust such an unlikely report? Not to mention, the trauma of the crucifixion is still fresh. If the religious establishment and Roman occupying forces are willing to lynch Jesus on impulse, they're certainly willing to do the same to his associates. So, **the disciples disregard the rumor of resurrection in favor of self-preservation:** "the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jewish authorities."

"Peace be with you," Jesus says, appearing suddenly among them. And he really means it; the disciples are in desperate need of some peace. They're huddled together, making themselves as invisible as possible. Confined to a single small space, their fear feeds off itself day after day. And, racked with anxiety, they're incapable of even setting foot outside of the safe house, their bodies weighed down by a crushing psychological burden.

“Peace be with you,” Jesus repeats as soon as his friends recognize him by his wounds, and rejoicing, they are momentarily freed from their trouble. Then he breathes on them, offering them the gift of the Holy Spirit – the very breath of life. And, **exhaling their distress, the disciples inhale the risen Lord’s peace. Their bodies relax, their hearts are calmed, and the hope of resurrection settles into the place where death had previously gripped them.**

The episode involving Thomas the following week is essentially an encore of Jesus’ first appearance. “Peace be with you,” he greets them again. Thomas’ doubt is no more pronounced than that of the other disciples, yet his transformation at the touch of Jesus’ wounds is even more dramatic. “My Lord and my God!” he exclaims, his heart suddenly flooded with faith. **The risen one is, in fact, the crucified one.¹ And the discovery is visceral, his physical presence inspiring a physical change in his followers.**

We know that spirit and mind and body are all connected. Life is necessarily embodied, and there’s no way around the physical manifestation of our fears and hopes, our pains and joys. **If you pay attention, you’ll notice where in your body you feel the effects of lived experience.** Your heart swells at the joy of good news or the pride of witnessing a loved one’s achievements. You clench your jaw during a prolonged argument. Your stomach sinks at the news of a sudden loss. You hold your breath as you wait on pins and needles for a critical outcome. Your

¹ D. Cameron Murchison, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, 398.

temperature rises as you try to stave off panic during an emergency. You awaken with your heart racing during a time of stress or uncertainty.

You know the physical toll that grief takes. You know where you hold your anxiety. You know what fear feels like. So, you know something about the disciples' experience in the days following the crucifixion. But **if suffering and death are embodied, then so is resurrection.** Jesus still bears the scars of crucifixion in his risen body, yet he is no longer afflicted by the pain of it. And, he extends this effect of resurrection to his followers. **"Peace be with you," he insists, inviting them to exchange their agitation for calm.**

Dear church, he encounters us in the same way today. The hope of resurrection is holistic: "My heart... is glad, and my spirit rejoices," the psalmist sings, "*my body also shall rest in hope.*"² **Even as we carry our distress in our bodies, the living Christ draws near and replaces it with his peace.** So, take a moment in the silence that follows the sermon to breathe deeply; exhale your heartache, your worries, your stress, and inhale the life of the Spirit. When you greet friends and strangers with a sign of Christ's peace, notice his love embodied in their words and their touch. When you come forward for the Lord's Supper, taste and *feel* that he is good. Finally, when you file out after worship, receive one last sign of resurrection hope: *Peace be with you.* Then, go enjoy your cookie.

² Italics added.