

UNLOCKED

Easter 2, Year A: 1 Peter 1:3-9
 Psalm 16
 John 20:19-31

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Key Passages: *When it was evening on that day the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” (John 20:19)*

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading... (1 Peter 1:3b)

Tomorrow a number of Bostonians, including clergy, are planning to participate in a rally to draw attention to the plight of immigrants in our community. In particular, we are calling for the release of children being held at the South Bay Detention Center. Basically they are in jail. For many of us, our participation arises from our belief in a God of liberation and life. It is a fundamental message of Easter.

Perhaps you were present for the Easter Vigil, in which we heard the traditional stories of God's constant movement from darkness to light, from oppression to liberty, and from death to life. Nothing in heaven or earth is more powerful than God's love for us. Even death cannot extinguish that love and care.
Alleluia!

And so today we continue to celebrate this care. And we recognize how difficult it is to receive and hold onto that good news. In our gospel reading, it is night, the end of Easter day. The disciples are huddled together in a locked room, fearful of the authorities who have put their beloved teacher to death. They have heard reports of an empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection, but it is not yet real to them. After the terrible events of the previous days, it is hard for them to grasp that Jesus will continue to be present to them.

There are good reasons that the church observes Easter as a fifty-day season. We need time to take in the significance of good news. Resurrection is not a magic pill that suddenly makes all of our fears and losses and disappointments disappear. There may be moments of great clarity for us, but mostly there are days of slowly realizing the truth of God's care for us, the unfolding of experiences that reassure and comfort us. And there are moments when we lose the thread completely and the darkness seems to overwhelm us.

The disciples have retained their instinct to be together, to come back from the various places where they have been scattered during the previous terrible days. They are together in a house—could it be the same place that they celebrated the Passover just a few short days ago? We don't know; we just know and understand their desire to be together. But their fears are great. They lock the doors, afraid that the authorities who have executed their rabbi may be coming after them.

Suddenly, without explanation, Jesus is present to them. And his first words are familiar: "Peace be with you." Then he shows them his wounds. The combination of his familiar voice and the sight of his battered body bring the disciples the joy of recognition of their beloved teacher. Again he speaks a word of peace, echoing the words at the Last Supper: "Peace I give to you; my peace I leave with you. I do not give as the world gives."

We are used to hearing those words at funerals, words of comfort at the time of death, spoken by Jesus, the one who is about to die. In today's story, they are words of reassurance on the other side of death. That God's peace is stronger than the powers of the grave. That nothing separates us from God's love. That the one who has borne the brunt of the world's hatred and suffering can speak a word of peace to us.

Jesus moves directly from assurance into commissioning. "Peace be with you," he says. And then he continues: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." God's peace is not some private gift to a select few. It is a command to share that peace, empowered by the spirit that Jesus breathes on them. Recall Jesus' words at the Last Supper, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another." Here the related command is to share the peace, in particular the peace of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is key here. Jesus has come to the disciples, locked away in fear and undoubtedly feelings of regret and failure. They have denied their Lord. They have failed to stand up to the powers of temple and state. Not knowing how to resist peacefully, they have denied any allegiance and have melted into the night. They are afraid for him and for themselves. What some of them might have glimpsed in the bright light of dawn that day, is fading now. They are reverting to this fear and uncertainty as the darkness of Easter night falls.

And Jesus penetrates their fears and guilt. He comes to them with words of reassurance, not condemnation. He comes to reestablish their sense of community, their joy in being part of his new kingdom, the rule of love.

Thomas is not part of the fellowship that night. The reports of his friends are not enough to draw him back in. Perhaps Thomas is recalling his previous brave statement as Jesus was going to Jerusalem, "Let us go with him that we

may die with him.” Where has Thomas been on those fateful days? We do not know. We only see him now, with his heart locked in doubt and fear, unable to see the gift of forgiveness and peace. But when he is again with his friends, he too sees Jesus and reacts with the strongest expression of faith in Jesus we have in Scriptures: “My Lord and my God.”

Jesus looks beyond his immediate friends, those who are able to enjoy his physical presence, and speaks to the rest of us: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Blessed are those of us who are touched by the power and forgiveness of God extended to us through being part of his circle of friends. Blessed are those who come to a place such as this, where our hearts tell us, we may encounter the One who loves us immeasurably and unfailingly. Perhaps we come with our hearts and minds locked in fear and uncertainty, anger and frustration, grief and loneliness, disappointment and failure. We come trusting that Jesus can penetrate all these locked doors so that we can receive his mercy and love.

And how does this penetration happen? Principally, I think, because we are part of a community of forgiveness. We come together, not to witness to our perfection, but to our constant need of forgiveness. As we make our prayers of confession, we recall the brokenness of ourselves and our world. As we receive Jesus’ self-offering in bread and wine, we understand the nature of sacrifice and of making whole. As Jesus breathes his power on his friends, his commandment is to share this peace and forgiveness. We receive these precious gifts and learn to share them in ways that begin to overcome the hurts and wrongs of the world around us. We begin with our relationships around the altar, and it circles out from there. We become a community of the forgiven and the forgiving.

It is in this community that we experience the joy of being followers of Christ. Christ comes to us on the other side of suffering, not to proclaim that there will be no more suffering, but that it is never the final word. That the love and peace which Jesus exemplifies has the power to bring us into new life on the other side of death. That is the promise we see in our first reading.

The First Letter of Peter was likely written from Rome at the end of the first century. It is directed to Christians in Asia Minor, faith communities composed primarily of Gentiles, especially aliens, slaves and women married to pagan husbands. These persons were especially vulnerable to persecution. Already at the lowest points in society, they were subjected to further degradation as being out of step with conventional norms, a threat to law and order. Their willingness to remain hopeful in the face of persecution was a joyful witness to the power of Christ’s nonviolent, peaceful message.

Today I am thinking about Aaron Hernandez. I had stopped reading about the trial, because frankly I was tired of hearing about this great football player who

apparently could not shake his association with violent friends, who could not control his rage, and who “threw away” the rewards of wealth and fame as a talented athlete.

And then he committed suicide leaving the message “John 3:16” written on his forehead and a Bible in his cell. I am no psychiatrist, and I can’t pretend to understand what was going on in his heart and mind. But I am haunted by the image of a confused and fearful man barricading himself in his prison cell, alone and dying. Could it be that he was reaching out for that forgiveness and love of which John’s gospel speaks? And could someone have helped him into a place where Jesus’ love could penetrate his locked-in darkness?

It is this message that propels me into tomorrow’s rally. To say to those who are locked away—to those most vulnerable in our society, increasingly targeted as threats to our security—to the children detained because their parents do not have the right documentation—to say by our presence, that we want God’s love to penetrate the locks that hold them in. To say that we have not forgotten them. To say that we will stand with them in the name of the one who comes into all our dark places with the light of love and forgiveness.

What are the locked places in your life? May the risen Christ break through them. And may you hear anew that familiar and beloved voice saying, “Peace be with you.”

Christ is risen! Alleluia!