

A Easter 2 4.19.20

John 20:19-31

Focus Statement: Jesus makes us new.

My first thought on reading the Gospel text for this morning was that the good news is so blatantly obvious for us in this Stay Home, Stay Safe time that it was almost a gimmie. I mean, come on. The disciples are in a house, the doors of which are locked because the disciples are afraid, and Jesus showed up, behind the locked doors, and said, "Peace be with you." Oh, and then Jesus breaths on them. This text is just begging to be another sermon about how bad Jesus is at social distancing, and what good and comforting news that is for us.

And that is good and comforting news. The promise that Jesus is able to just show up in the spaces and places that we are locked to just be among us, that's great news. I mean, I don't know about all of you but as much as I love Travis, we're both ready to be within six feet of someone besides each other. If I'm only allowed within six feet of one person, I'm glad Travis is that person, but I'd rather be able to be within six feet of more than one person. In this text we have a Jesus who does just that. Who comes to where the disciples are, amid their very real and genuine and legitimate fear and gives them a sign and a promise of his peace. And that is super good news for us. It's good news for us all the time, but it is super good news when we are all behind doors locked in fear yes, but also in wise precaution, and in concern for our neighbors, to know that we have a God who comes to us wherever we are. I was listening to a podcast this week in which an Old Testament scholar was talking about the role of Jerusalem and the Temple in scripture as being places "where humans

lived in the immediate presence of God.” What this text does for us is it reminds us that all places are places where we live in the immediate presence of God.

That’s great. This is one of those texts where I could stop here and say Amen, and we’d all be satisfied with the good news of this story. But as I was thinking about this text this week, something else kept catching my attention. So I want to invite us this morning to start to look beyond our current Stay Home, Stay Safe world, and start to think about what good news this text has for us when we can respond to Jesus’ command that we be sent, just as he was sent by the Father.

The text tells us Jesus “breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’” The work Jesus sent the disciples, sends us out to do, is the work of forgiveness. But what is forgiveness? That’s the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question right there, isn’t it: what is forgiveness?

We teach children from an early age to “forgive and forget,” right? But I wonder if forgetting is really a wise part of forgiveness, or even a faithful part. Let’s take our small child and imagine said child was playing too rough with the kitty and got scratched. Now, assuming said cat is mostly well-behaved and not the horrible demon beast I lived with one summer, we might assure the child that kitty didn’t mean it, and they should forgive the kitty. They should forgive the kitty, but they probably shouldn’t forget, right. Because there is value in learning that kitty is going to scratch you if you pull its tail.

Now hold on here because this is obviously a limited example. Unless the aggressor is a cat, we ought not to let perpetrators of wrong off so easy. However, I think it is worth asking about both the practicality and the value in forgetting as an aspect of forgiveness.

The other thing that had me questioning the value of forgetting is that this is a resurrection story. And as we've talked about, one of the key aspects of resurrection is that it is not an undoing of the bad thing that happened to the way things were before, it is a transformation through that bad thing to a whole new way of being. The resurrected Jesus is still the crucified Jesus. Resurrection wasn't a do-over, where Jesus came back to life because killing him was a mistake in the first place. Resurrection happened because through crucifixion Jesus destroyed the power of death itself. Without crucifixion, resurrection is meaningless.

The other piece to think about here is what we mean when we talk about sin. We tend to think about sin as an action. Pulling the cat's tail, for example, would be sin. Or coveting your neighbor's ox, or murder. Obviously those actions are not on the same level of effect, and we end up ranking sin from super bad, murder, to meh, like, I don't know, not telling someone they have spinach in their teeth. And then we get into the question of who gets to decide what is sin and what is not. Because on a scale of murder to spinach, there is a whole lot of in-between. And what some communities see as horrible sin, others see seeing that thing as sin as itself a sin. You see the complication when Jesus gives us the command to forgive and retain sins. Who gets to pick them?

The Gospel of John simplifies this for us by defining sin in a totally different way. Sin in John's Gospel isn't about moral action or behavior. Sin in John's Gospel is about relationship, specifically about the breaking of a relationship. Sin is that which separates us from God. And what we see in these resurrection stories is Jesus continually being about the work of restoring relationship. We talked about it last week, when Jesus said to the women about the disciples, "Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee." Go tell my brothers. These are the disciples who are not even in the entire twenty-seventh chapter of Matthew, because they peaced out at the end of chapter twenty-six, but his first words after his resurrection was to call them brothers. And we see it this week when Thomas said he needed to see the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands, so Jesus showed up and was like, ok, here are my hands, because Jesus is always about meeting people where they are at and giving them the thing that they need to move forward. The resurrection stories are all about Jesus rebuilding relationships that had been broken, not by him but by those around him, so that they can be about the work of restoring relationships with the world. This is our work now, people of God. John's Gospel places us with the disciples, so we are the ones who have been breathed on by the Holy Spirit, we are the ones sent by Jesus to do the work God first sent him to do, to forgive sin, to rebuild relationship. Not to forget, but to transform.

Part of what got me thinking about all this recently is all the conversations we seem to be having about normal. About when we can return to normal, and how this is a new normal, and what will be normal when all this is through. Travis hates the phrase "new normal,"

and while I fully agree that not shaking hands or having any semblance of an economy or ever leaving our homes is not the normal I want to continue with, I do think now is a great time for us to start to think about what parts of what we are experiencing do we not want to forget? What might it not be helpful, or even faithful to forget? One thing the pandemic is doing is it is laying bare all of the places in our society that were not working well to begin with. In Michigan, fourteen percent of the population is African American, yet African Americans make up forty percent of the COVID-19 deaths. Dr. Rashawn Ray, a David M. Rubenstein Fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C. remarked, "COVID-19 is an equal opportunity disease. The problem is that our U.S. healthcare system is not." Issues like access to health care, food deserts, and water shut-offs—economic problems—are compounding the effect of this disease in our inner cities. Thanks to the actions of some of our policy makers, some of these issues are being addressed now on a crisis basis. Since 2014, one-hundred and forty-one thousand Detroit households have had their water shut off. In an effort to combat COVID-19, Detroit has been restoring water access and there are currently less than 100 houses in Detroit without water. If one-hundred and forty-one thousand homes without water is normal, that is not a normal I want to return to.

And there is a lot of well-deserved praise right now for frontline essential service workers. People like grocery store clerks, restaurant employees, long-range truck drivers, mail carriers, bus drivers, I could go on and on and on. These people are being raised up as heroes, and they are. But it is not enough to call them heroes, if we don't also acknowledge that they didn't sign up to be heroes. And some, maybe even many, continue to work out of care for the greater good of all of us, but some are there because they don't have a choice.

Because their families are dependent on the money they bring in, and they don't have a safety net if that job falls through, or if they get sick, or cannot work. The living wage for one adult in Calhoun County is eleven dollars an hour. That's one single adult, with no children, no previous debt, no extenuating circumstances, eleven dollars an hour. Let us not forget that many of the heroes in this pandemic are making less than that. That too is not a normal I want to return to.

The promise of Easter, the promise of our faith, dear people of God, is the promise of resurrection. It is the promise that life always follows death, that joy always comes after despair, and that God is always reaching from divinity across to our humanity to be in relationship with us. We are in the gap right now, that liminal space where the future is not yet clear. So let us use this time to dream about what resurrection will look like, how we want to live on the other side of today. Because the gift of this passage is that we have been given the Holy Spirit. How then do we want to transform our future? Amen.