

Will Easter Change Anything?

(JOHN 20:19-31 NRSV) *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." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disci-*

ples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." ²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

He came into their presence and said, "Peace be with you." Peace? They desperately needed it! No more discouraged people could be found than that bewildered, broken, frightened little group of disciples.

In the first place, they had good reason to be afraid; some of those who'd had Jesus crucified still stalked the streets, redneck holdouts from Friday's mob violence. And so the disciples huddled together, peeking through the curtain, cringing at the sound of every step on the stair. Blow out the lamp! Lock the door!

And then Jesus appeared in the room and said, "Peace be with you!" Peace? In addition to their fear, their peace had been shattered because they knew they'd failed their Lord, sadly and inexcusably. Their consciences were tormented and sore, their self-respect wounded and raw.

But even worse was the incredible fact (it seemed like a fact to them) that their Lord had failed them no less tragically than they'd failed him. His confident promises seemed only hollow words now: empty and cluttered like a vacant lot after the carnival moves on. They'd pinned their hopes for a new political order on him, but now he seemed, if not an imposter, at least pitifully self-deceived; and the wonderful dream he'd awakened in them had now flickered out.

Good Friday changed so many things. It brought fear and danger; shattered hopes and dreams—left them disillusioned. They'd dreamed, not only of a new political order, but even of positions of status and authority for themselves in that new order. Good Friday left them drowning in their own failure.

But now it's Easter, and he stands in their midst and says, "Peace be with you." How is it they're caught so completely off guard? He's already appeared to Mary Magdalene; and she's told them he was alive. But it was just so incredible—and she was just a woman.

But John also saw the empty tomb and believed. Surely, he told them? We don't know. We're told only that Jesus was there: so evident; so obvious; so undeniable. "See my hands; see my side." And they believed; and rejoiced.

And then he says again, "Peace be with you." And he adds, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." I don't know. With these guys' track record, isn't there somebody else he can send?

I remember when I was sixteen, just learning to drive. My family was returning from vacation and I was driving. My grandmother had gone with us, and we stopped by her house to drop her off. As I turned into the driveway I misjudged and hit a post at the entrance. The left headlight was broken, and the fender was dented. My dad made some predictable response, and when we got out of the car he went immediately to the front of the car to survey the damage.

I moved to the trunk—which was in the rear of the car—and very magnanimously began to unload Grandmother's suitcase and carry it inside.

It was the first new car my mom and dad had ever owned—a 1957 Plymouth (You know—big rocket fins on the rear fenders.)

The vacation was over, and I assumed my driving career also was over. My wings would be clipped. Grounded. Busted to a desk job! But as we walked back to the car, Dad tossed me the keys and walked around to the passenger door.

The gift of trust... It is, itself, a breath of new life and power.

On Easter, behind locked doors, in the midst of the disciples' doubt and failure, Jesus "tossed them the keys." "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And with that, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and he was gone. And the rest is history.

Easter made a difference in the lives of those gathered in that secret place. But somebody was missing. Isn't somebody always missing? And when Thomas showed up the next time they met, they had to catch him up. Now, Thomas gets a lot of bad press: "doubting Thomas", he's called. But note: Thomas caught up exactly where the others caught up: when Jesus showed him the scars in his hands and side. And then he said to Thomas: "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*"

One of the themes of John's Gospel is that seeing with the eyes of the body is not enough. Seeing is not always believing! John's Gospel doesn't talk

about miracles. He calls them "signs." But even those who saw the signs didn't always believe.

At the tomb on Easter morning, two disciples saw exactly the same thing. But John says of "the one whom Jesus loved," "He saw and believed." Both saw; one believed. Seeing is not the connection.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

First, Jesus showed them the scars in his hands and side. Then he said, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit".

This may be John's account of Pentecost. Three things happened, all of which seem to be connected, and which together resulted in the disciples going out and changing the world: (1) they recognized the presence of the risen Christ in their midst, (2) they accepted the Lord's commission, and (3) they received the Holy Spirit.

I think it's part of John's message that these three go together. One does not experience the presence of Christ without also becoming aware of the demands of discipleship. There is no cheap grace. And one does not become aware of the demands of discipleship without also becoming aware of the power and the joy that accompany the work of the Lord.

One minute they're running scared: slipping down dark alleys, collar turned up, hat brim pulled low, huddling behind locked doors. The next minute they're turning the world upside down. And it's John's witness that the difference hinges on what happened in that room.

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Whom God calls, God equips and empowers. The Lord's work is a source of joy and fulfillment. If your participation in the church is a bother or a burden, maybe it's not the Lord's work you're doing.

The difference between the Lord's work and "busy work" is those three things that happened in that room behind locked doors. They experienced it face-to-face; we experience it through a deeper life of prayer and meditation. But, the difference always begins in recognizing the love behind those nail-scarred hands. That's the difference Easter makes.

Peace be with you.

Prayer Slide