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Second Sunday of Easter

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The Peace Pulpit

Probably most of us haven't noticed the slight change in the way we designate the Sundays after the Feast of Easter. We used to talk about them as the Second Sunday after Easter, the Third Sunday after Easter and so on until we get to the seventh Sunday. But now it's simply the Second Sunday of Easter that we celebrate today. It may not seem significant, but it is.

What we're being taught is that this period of seven weeks, the 50 days after Easter, is a continuation of the one feast, the one event, this extraordinary, unbelievable almost, event: Jesus being raised from the dead and living among us. During this seven week period, the church is taking time to instruct us. So we must listen carefully each week to grow in our understanding.

Today's Readings
Acts 4:32-35
Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24
John 5:1-6
John 20:19-31

You remember, I hope, from last week when we listened to Mark's Gospel, the event of the resurrection did not bring what we hear today: Peace and a sense of security, a sense of hope, of joy. The women who had gone to the tomb had that experience of hearing angels tell them "He is not here, he is risen, go and tell the disciples," but they did not know what was happening. They were confused. They were afraid. They, in fact, ran away. And the rest of the disciples were in the same situation. They had no clear understanding, and the Gospel of Mark ends right there with the disciples in confusion, disarray, fear. Running. Finally as we hear in today's gospel they go into hiding because of their fear.

But John's Gospel, the one we listen to today -- we've spoken about his before -- was written decades later, long after the disciples had many opportunities to experience through their faith life and their spirit life, the presence of Jesus alive in their midst. Not a resuscitated Jesus, not like Lazarus coming out of the

tomb, being the same as he was before. But a mysterious, a transcendent, almost indescribable way of experiencing Jesus alive. But it was a reality: They did know Jesus is alive. So over a period of years as they told different stories and finally as this gospel was put together, maybe 30 even almost 40 years later, after all those events, we have instructions that come from that experience of the risen Jesus and reflections on it and praying over it. In today's gospel, we discover the fruits of that experience described for us. Now when the disciples are gathered in the upper room, according to this it's Sunday night, the first day of the week after the Sabbath, after Jesus had been executed, they experience Jesus.

His first word to them is "Peace." In the language of Jesus, peace was the opposite not of conflict but of fear. So they experienced this deep calmness, peace. That is what the risen Jesus brings when we open ourselves to him.

But then Jesus does something extraordinary, and this again comes as the fruit of their experience and prayer. They realize that Jesus, now that he has died and risen from the dead, is no longer with them physically. He has asked them to continue the very work that he came into this world to do, to transform the world into the reign of God. "As the Father has sent me, I send you." What happens, according to this account from John, is that Jesus breathes on them. Now commentators for the scriptures tell us that that word was used in this incident is a very special word. It is used only one other time in the Hebrew Bible. It's the word used in the book of Genesis when God is portrayed as creating human beings. God has formed the image of man out of clay. Lifeless. God is described as breathing on Adam. Adam becoming alive, a living human being, loved into existence by the breath of God. Now the disciples have realized "we are a living human community breathed into life by the love of God." God breathed on them. God loved them into this community. Now it is the disciples who are to carry on the very same work of Jesus. "God has sent me, I send you."

That is what is being said to every one of us this morning. God is sending us. And notice because this is so important as the work of the community. The first task Jesus describes for them as they experience his communing with them, speaking with them. "Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven. Whose sins you restrain, the evil you block, it is blocked." Now we have come to think of that mistakenly as Jesus establishing the Sacrament Penance and thinking of the priest being the one who decides to forgive or not to forgive. But no. It is the whole community called to be a healing, forgiving community. And never to withhold forgiveness. The word means to restrain evil. So by forgiveness you restrain evil.

Maybe one of the most extraordinary examples of how this works within the community of disciples is what happened in South Africa. I am sure most of us remember the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in that country that had been torn apart by violence, hatred, the apartheid system, a system of destruction of life. The majority of the people oppressed, violated, deprived and over many decades. When the system was finally broken apart, it didn't mean that everything would be healed immediately. Archbishop Desmond Tutu established a process that is so clearly the kind of work that Jesus intended his community to do. He established truth commissions. Those who were responsible were held accountable. They would come forward and say yes I did this. They would identify the crimes that they were accused of. But those who had been oppressed, had been violated, did not seek vengeance. They were ready to bestow forgiveness and they did. That forgiveness was accepted and reconciliation happened.

That is a marvelous example of how the community of disciples is to carry out and make happen what Jesus said, "As God sent me I send you to bring healing, forgiveness and love into our world."

I won't dwell on it, but I think I just need to mention, in our church right now, this would be an extraordinary opportunity do the same type of thing, to heal the deep wound in the church because of the abuse of children that has happened over many decades, even centuries. We haven't dealt with it accept

through adversarial, legal proceedings. There has been no accountability on the part of the leaders of the church who allowed this to go on for so long. They have not been held accountable. Victims have not been given the opportunity to forgive and then be reconciled by being believed, by having their forgiveness accepted because those who perpetrated the evil acknowledge what they did. What an opportunity for our church if we were to follow the example of Archbishop Tutu in South Africa, if we were to really to carry out the mandate given to us in today's Gospel, to be a forgiving and healing community.

One more thing that I think is very important for us to dwell on for a few moments as we reflect on today's Gospel and we try to understand more deeply the meaning of the risen Jesus in our midst. We have the incident of Thomas described. He was not there that first Sunday night, so he missed the opportunity to experience this peace that calmed fear, eliminated fear. He did not experience that breath of Jesus upon him giving him the new life of the risen Jesus. He was adamant about not wanting to believe. I think many of us find this a very encouraging incident, because of what Jesus said after he has offered Thomas the opportunity to do what Thomas had demanded and Thomas recognized Jesus, this risen living Jesus. But then Jesus said to Thomas: "Thomas you believed because you had this special opportunity. Blessed are those who have not seen in this way but still believe." That is all of us who have not had that same immediacy of the resurrection but know we continue to depend on witnesses of all of those from the very beginning and down through the centuries who have witnessed to us and whose witness we accept. And we believe, truly believe, yes we know that the risen Jesus is alive in our midst. We are blessed even though we have not seen in the way those first disciples experienced it, the dramatic risen presence of Jesus.

But we should notice that there is a special way that Jesus reveals to Thomas who he is. His wounds. In one of the other gospels, Matthew's gospel Chapter 25, a chapter we are very familiar with, we have, in a way, this same incident happening. People see Jesus in his wounds. "When I was hungry you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty you gave me to drink. When I was naked you clothed me. You see what is happening there is people come to recognize Jesus in his woundedness. Jesus says, "Here is where I am. If you want to find me living now in this world go among the poor and the oppressed, those who are most deprived, those who are suffering. Be with them and you will discover me. You will find me alive with them."

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It sounds so easy in a way, doesn't it when it is described in John's Gospel. Just look at the wounds and you know it is Jesus. Matthew's Gospel makes it a little more challenging. Touch the poor; be with the poor, the oppressed, and the wounded. All of those who are treated with contempt, who are persecuted, who are made to suffer, who are deprived in any way. That is where Jesus is.

Those first disciples experienced the presence of the risen Jesus over the weeks and months and years after he had been executed but rose from the dead. They have shared those experiences with us in these written accounts. Today once more I hope we will try to listen deeply to what these disciples describe happened to them, and that we too will experience the risen Jesus presence among us. The Jesus who will drive away fear by giving us the gift of his peace. The Jesus who will breathe upon us, giving us his new life, his own risen life. The Jesus who will tell us, "As God has sent me I will send you." The Jesus who urges us to be a forgiving, loving, healing community.

I hope that we will experience all that, and I know that we will. As we experience it, we will begin to make happen what St. Luke describes in our first reading today: "The whole community of believers were

one in heart and mind. No one considered as their own what belonged to him or her. Rather they shared all things in common. With great power the disciples bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. For they were living in time of grace. Now listen, There was no needy one among them, because those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the proceeds from the sale and laid it at the feet of the disciples who distributed it according to each one's need.

Imagine what could happen if we allowed ourselves to experience deeply the risen Jesus in our midst asking us to continue his work to make the reign of God happen. We would become a community one in mind and heart. There would be no one in need in our midst. We would truly have the beginnings of the reign of God.

We must pray and work that we will experience the risen Jesus in this powerful way. That we will carry on his work now. Go and bring his message, his love, his goodness into our world.

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