

Easter Sunday last week was a high point for many of us. The flowers, the music, the wonderful gathering of people, and most importantly the message that Christ is risen. Of course, it was also a high point because after the service I got to rest after a busy Holy Week. I was also fortunate to have Monday off from school. As I was making pancakes for my family, I was listening to the radio news and my heart sank. Another suicide bombing in Israel. Someone went up to a sandwich stand in the capitol, Tel Aviv, and blew themselves up, killing nine and wounding at least fifty persons. “What about Easter?” I asked myself. “How can such things continue to happen if Jesus conquered sin through his death and resurrection?” As I read over today’s Gospel, the word that struck me most forcefully was Jesus’ first word to his disciples... “Peace.” In the face of persistent violence, in the face of all the ways that we continue to sin against each other, how are we to understand the “peace” proclaimed by the risen Jesus? How are we to proclaim the peace of Christ in a world consumed by war?

Those disciples of Jesus may have had similar questions on their minds as they gathered together on that first day of the week. How are they to make sense of Mary Magdalene’s announcement that, “I have seen the Lord?” We hear in today’s lesson according to John that the doors of the house were locked because the disciples were afraid. Perhaps they were afraid that the Jewish religious authorities would be coming to ask questions about the missing body of Jesus. What would they say? He’s risen from the dead? Perhaps they were afraid to believe that it was true, afraid to accept the awesome truth that Jesus had really come back from the dead, afraid to even think about what that might mean for their lives.

And then, despite the locked doors Jesus comes and stands among them. His first words to them, “Peace be with you,” sound like a customary greeting, but Jesus is doing much more than simply saying hello. Jesus is doing much more than simply wishing

peace to his followers. Our English translation, “Peace BE with you,” implies a hopeful thought: “I wish for you to have peace” or “May peace be with you.” In the Greek, the phrase sounds more like, “Peace to you.” It’s a statement of action not a hopeful wish. Jesus is announcing the gift of peace. Peace is not simply a possibility. Peace is a reality. Peace to you! Here it is. And after Jesus shows the disciples his hands and his side, the scars of his torture and death, he says it again. “Peace to you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus appears in their midst not only so that they may believe that he has risen. He appears in their midst to announce a peace, a peace which they will need in order to fulfill their mission.

What is this peace of which Jesus speaks? We tend to think of peace in terms of what it is not. Peace is the absence of war, the absence of violence and strife. For Jesus, for the Hebrews, peace, shalom, meant much more. Shalom peace implied a sense of wholeness, a sense of completeness and soundness, a sense of fulfillment. And so when Jesus says “Peace to you” he is saying, “You are whole, complete, fulfilled.” I want us to take just a moment to imagine Jesus appearing to those fearful followers, and his first message to them is “You are fulfilled and complete.” Jesus is announcing to them and us what has been done in his death and resurrection. The brokenness of humanity has been healed. The gap caused by sin, by our turning away from God, has been bridged. The war between God and God’s people is over. Sin has lost. God’s love is triumphant. We are whole again. The disciples need to understand this, and so Jesus repeats himself. Peace to you. You need not be broken or fearful any more. And then, Jesus gives them the gift of Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins. He gives them the power of the resurrected Christ to continue the work of restoring wholeness to God’s people broken by sin.

But where is that shalom peace now? Where was it last Monday when nine died in Tel Aviv? Where is it when Israeli bulldozers knock over more homes in occupied Palestine? Where is God's shalom peace when soldiers in Iraq are losing limbs and lives? Where was peace when prisoners were tortured in Abu Graib? Today we mark Earth Day Sunday which raises the question where is peace when we continue to deplete and abuse earth's resources, when we torture the environment? Where is peace?

I'd like to tell you a story about a soldier, a soldier in the Israeli army. One day he was on patrol in an area of occupied Palestine when he felt a rock strike him in the back. Before he had a chance to turn around, another rock had struck him in the shoulder, then another hit his helmet. He whirled around, his rifle ready to fire. In his sights were several Palestinian children. Children. They were picking up more stones to throw at him. The soldier did not want to fire, but he could not allow them to attack him again. Suddenly, he had an idea. He bent down and picked up three of the rocks. He picked them up and began to juggle. Yes, juggle. The children were mesmerized and forgot about their stones. The soldier did a few tricks, and the children laughed. Then he did a grand finale, and they applauded. He took a bow and walked away.

No, that soldier did not end the war with his action. But he took what had been hurled as weapons and transformed them into objects of wonder. He took a broken moment and made it whole with the laughter of children. That moment revealed God's shalom, the peace that Christ gave us in his death and resurrection. Christ took the cross, a tool of torture and death, and transformed it into a symbol of salvation. Christ took death and transformed it into life. Christ took our despair and turned it into hope. He took our sins and juggled them before our eyes that we might forget our hatred and focus on his power and love.

The good news of Easter is that Christ has risen and with him he has brought a wholeness and a fulfillment, a shalom that passes all understanding. He gives his followers, his Church, this shalom, this peace. He gives it to the Church so that the Church might go out and proclaim the forgiveness of sins, the end of the war between God and humanity. It may not seem that way sometimes, because sin is so prevalent. But Christ has already won the victory. Our job as the church, as the body of Christ, is to continue Christ's saving work until Christ comes again to complete it once and for all. Christ gives peace to the Church through the Holy Spirit so that the Church might throw open its doors to the broken and the unfulfilled that they might also receive the peace of Christ. We, the church, have a mission. Yes, sin continues. Brokenness, war, violence will all continue until Christ completes his work. And the church has a role to play in that work. The Church has the power to forgive sins in the name of Christ. We have the power, through Christ, to heal a wounded world. We have the power, through Christ's resurrection, to set the captives free, to proclaim release to those held in the grasp of despair. We have the power, through Christ, to take the stony hearts of the world and juggle them until they float with the Holy Spirit.

We, the church, have the power. We, the church, have the mission. Our mission is not easy or simple. Our mission requires faith and imagination and courage. And it requires that we know the peace of Christ. Christ has already given us this peace. Earlier I asked you to imagine Christ speaking to his disciples. Now I want you to imagine Christ speaking to you. I invite you to close your eyes and imagine Jesus speaking to you behind the locked doors of your heart. Jesus says, "Peace to you. You are whole. You are complete. You are fulfilled through me." We gather in this room today to remember, to give thanks, and to be healed and strengthened to go in peace to love and serve the risen Christ. Peace to you. Amen.