

**April 19, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT: John 20:19–23**

**TITLE: A Spiritual Partnership**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Prayer of Illumination: *Guiding God, send your Holy Spirit upon the reading and hearing of your Word, that it may serve to show us the path of life and lead us into your presence where there is fullness of joy; O Lord, you are our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

John 20: 19-23: *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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "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."*

Boy, if ever a scripture passage hits home, this Sunday's reading from the gospel of John surely does! Think about it. Back then the disciples—the men and women who would become the early church—were gathered behind locked doors when Jesus appeared to them. Today the doors of the church are again locked, not fearing the threat of mob violence but fearful nonetheless of an external threat. And now we—siblings in Christ, scattered in our various locked rooms—are told again that the risen Jesus is in our midst. What does it mean to be the church of Christ today? And on this post-Easter Sunday how can we affirm that Jesus is still active in our midst?

What does it mean to be the church today? For one thing, it means that we focus on relationships more than routines. When our doors were open, we too often flipped those priorities. We all had routines for Sunday mornings: times we'd arrive in the building; Sunday School classes we'd visit or particular pews we'd sit in; expectations of coffee and conversation afterwards or dashing out a side door to a buffet lunch or a Trader Joe's run. As part of that Sunday morning routine, we'd also greet one another, sing hymns, offer prayers, hear scripture, and hopefully take a moment to breathe in God's grace in a familiar, sacred place. It wasn't bad by any means, but it was a religiosity shaped by routine.

Now there are no pews, no post-worship coffee, no breathing in God's grace while looking at familiar sanctuary walls. Now the new church routines are efforts to stay connected through phone calls, emails, and social media posts. Now there are live-streams and Zoom worship services, internet-based times of prayer, youth group fellowship and Christian Education classes. This is less than ideal, because so much of faith involves being together—being part of a group

humbly receiving communion, having an unexpected conversation during a church anti-racism discussion or lectionary bible study, breaking down the walls of homogeneous neighborhoods by being part of a diverse, welcoming worship community. But perhaps, it is finally time to stop counting attendance based on who is in the pews on Sunday. Perhaps in this age of electronic banking, it is time to stop being reliant on passed plate offerings. Perhaps new member classes won't be limited to people who reside in the Pittsburgh area (which is true of our next class later this month).

A big part of being a Presbyterian church following Jesus Christ today, right now, means actively believing that what Christ did on Easter long ago he is still doing today. The Christ who treated neither a stone-closed tomb nor a fear-closed door as a barrier to faith appears to the church and offers two things: words of peace and the breath, the Holy Spirit, of commissioning. "Peace be with you"—Jesus actually said it twice. And between the repetitions of this blessing he showed them his wounds—his nail-scarred hands and side. No big speech. No sermon. Christ simply showed the scars of the worst that the world can do to anyone, even as he had just defeated the worst the world can do. "Peace" he offers to wounded, heartsick disciples. "Peace" he offers to wounded, alone, frightened people today. "Peace" he offers as a rebuttal to a world whose focus on companies too big to fail means they are willing to treat everyone else as being too small to matter. In a once-heard-never-forgotten voice, Jesus says to each of us, "Peace be with you."

But peace is just the first part of his two-part gift. Jesus breathes on us, giving the gift of the Holy Spirit as he commissions us to go into the world. He said it this way, "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" Today that almost sounds like a cruel command—being sent into the world precisely when we can't go out, can't interact with others due to social distancing and stay at home directives. But again, stones and locked doors are no excuse here. Jesus basically said, "As I have done, go and do likewise." Remember him standing before a crowd and saying "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven." (Luke 6:20) Countless lives were changed from those simple words. Remember him deflecting the anger of a vengeful mob by slowly writing in the dust and then saying to them, "Whoever is without sin may cast the first stone." (John 8:7) In that simple act, hearts were changed then and are still being changed now.

Being sent by Christ is not dependent on literally going out in the world—especially not right now. Being sent means remembering how we are connected to one another and that we must act on that connection. It is doing what is right for the sake of others out of an unconditional love already shown to us by Christ and knowing that it is something worth being passed on without cost or measure.

Here's another way to think about this. E.B. White, the noted author of "Charlotte's Web," was asked to write a paragraph answering the question, "What is democracy?" In his typical, droll manner, he said this: "Surely [everyone] knows what democracy is. It is the line that forms on the right. It is the "don't" in don't shove. It is the feeling of privacy in voting booths, the feeling of communion in libraries, the feeling of vitality everywhere. Democracy is a letter to the editor, the score at the top of the ninth [inning]...It is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time."<sup>1</sup>

Following White's model, if asked the question "What does it mean to be sent by Christ today?" we might say, "It means making sure all are welcome in all the world's lines. It is the "thou shalt not" when our egos get the better of us. It is that feeling of hope in every newborn child, the feeling of trust that good is stronger than evil. It is a stranger who becomes a friend, a promise that "it does get better." Being sent by Christ is the lingering belief that we are not alone and there is much more to see in this life and the life to come, together."

Now, as I mentioned, when Christ commissioned the disciples, he breathed on them the Holy Spirit. It was an act of renewal and empowerment, just like the breath God breathed into clay to create life at the beginning of time – and just like the breath God blew over the dry bones in the resurrection vision given to the old prophet Ezekiel. Jesus' words of commission and breath of new life were then followed by an unusual phrase of obligation: *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*" On one level, this makes perfect sense. Jesus was in the sin-removal business. Remember John the Baptist's pronouncement when he first spotted Jesus that day long ago? *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!* (John 1:29) If we are being sent into the world as Christ was sent, we too should be in the sin-removal business. Does that mean we are religious accountants, counting up people's debts and tending the ledgers of who is worthy and who is not? No. To forgive sin is to be one who lifts them off, who releases someone from these burdens and sets them free. If we act to bring hope, to show grace, to forgive and welcome all into a loving fellowship, then their sins and burdens are no more. If we do not do these things, if we are indifferent, distracted, self-centered and small-minded, then sadly those sins and burdens will continue in the world. They will remain because of us.

All of this circles back to what I asked earlier—What is the church to be and do in this season of locked doors and lingering fear? I suggest we be guided by the baselines given to us by the brave medical workers in our midst—and then step out beyond those bare minimums as ones who know the peace of Christ, who

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, How Democracies Die, Broadway Books, 2018, p. 284.

have been blown on by the Holy Spirit, and who are sent by God the source of true life.

What are the baselines? In the news are heartbreaking stories of over-burdened emergency rooms and patients separated from families as they live out their final hours. Chaplains have had to hold up cellphones to dying patients as family members offer a few words shaped around five basic thoughts: “Thank you. I forgive you; please forgive me. I love you. Goodbye.” A physician, working in an ER, instructed his nurses to do two things as patients approached death: hold their hand for a minute as they near death or pass away, and have the entire medical team nearby stop for 5-10 seconds, bow their heads, say the person’s name, and ask for silence. He said it was one simple way to retain our humanity in a time of crisis and to let patients’ families know the death of their loved one was treated with dignity.<sup>2</sup>

If those simple acts are bare minimum baselines—holding a cellphone to a dying person’s ear, holding their hand and giving them a moment of respectful silence at their death—we can assuredly do more. Sent by Christ—blown by the Spirit—we can seek out the forgotten, check on the lonely and neglected, pray for the weary and the anxious, do our part to make sure no one is at risk because of our choices. Sent by Christ—blown by the Spirit—we can find ways to get food to the hungry, change laws to protect the vulnerable and migrant, do what we can to keep arts groups, small restaurants and family businesses afloat because out of such diversity comes a healthy community. Sent by Christ—blown by the Spirit—we can be the church outside our four walls; we can treat the stimulus checks not as personal enrichment but resources to sustain both individuals and serve the common good. The list could go on—because stones, locked doors, and CDC directives cannot impede the Easter resurrection momentum of a risen Lord and a faithful church.

This story from John’s gospel is truly a story for us today. With all our wounds, may we know the peace that is stronger than every scar. Despite the stuffy air of our isolation, may the breath of the enlivening Holy Spirit fill our lungs. Despite our locked doors, may we find ways to go forth into the world after the example of a living, redeeming Savior. And as we forgive sins, lift burdens, cast aside all that would keep people in chains of body, mind or spirit, may nothing be retained that is contrary to Christ’s vision for us all. If we can do that, then we’ll understand what it means to be in spiritual partnership with a risen Christ today!

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<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, April 12, 2020 – “Amid the Pandemic, Some Fear Dying Alone the Most” (John Leland); “Life and Death in the ‘Hot Zone’” (Nicholas Kristof).