

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

**TEXT: John 20:19–23**

**TITLE: A Spiritual Partnership**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

*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."*

These verses are the first part of a larger story that describes Jesus' appearance to the disciples on Easter evening—first without Thomas present, and then a week later, with Thomas present. So often Thomas' role in the story is all we focus on. But there's a lot of important stuff here in these few verses before Thomas is even mentioned. So let's focus on those things today.

On that Easter evening, four things happened in quick succession. First, Jesus appeared to the disciples, who were fearful and hidden away behind locked doors, and offered them words of peace. Maybe it was meant as a comforting greeting—sort of a combination of "don't be afraid" and "great to see you again." But I'm pretty sure it had a deeper meaning than that. Back in John 14, when everyone was gathered for the Last Supper, Jesus also extended peace to the group. He said, "*My peace I give to you; I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*" And after other words of comfort, he concluded by saying "*I have said this to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage! I have conquered the world!*" (John 14:27, 16:33)

Jesus actually said "Peace be with you" twice. But in-between the first and second times, he did something important. He showed them his hands and his side—the scars of his crucifixion. It is an interesting detail. The resurrected Christ appears and there is no heavenly fanfare, no big speech, no pronouncement from on high. Just a greeting of peace and a showing of scars. There's a real connection between these two events. Christ's wounds revealed the worst the can do to someone, even as he stood before them, alive, resurrected, having defeated the worst the world can do. In effect, he is not just offering them "peace" but showing them the power of "peacemaking." In that moment, he is giving hope to everyone wounded, scarred and frightened even today. He is giving value to everyone forgotten, dismissed or overlooked today. In an age where our energy goes to protect companies too big to fail, Jesus' peace speaks up for those the

world considers too small to matter. In his once-heard-never-forgotten voice, Jesus still says to each of us, “Peace be with you.”

The second thing that happened was that Jesus commissioned his disciples—and, in effect, is commissioning us today. He said, “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” All four of the gospels link Jesus’ resurrection with some sort of commissioning of the disciples. Matthew’s gospel ends with the clearest commissioning statement: *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and telling them to obey my commandments, and remember I am with you always to the end of the age.* But the commissioning from Christ in John’s gospel today seems like a cruel trick—being sent into the world precisely when we can’t go out; precisely when we can’t interact with others due to social distancing and stay at home directives. But remember, Easter has proven that stones over graves and doors locked out of fear are no barrier to real faith anymore. Being sent by Christ is not dependent on literally going out in the world—especially not right now. Being sent primarily means remembering how we are connected one to another and that we must daily act on that awareness. It is doing what is right for the sake of others out of an unconditional love shown to us by God in Christ, plus a faithful commitment to pass on that love to others without cost or fear or hesitancy.

The third thing Christ did was that he breathed on them the Holy Spirit. It was an act of renewal and empowerment, just like the breath that God breathed into clay to create life at the beginning of time—and just like the breath that God blew over the disjointed, dry bones in the resurrection vision given to the prophet Ezekiel. And after Jesus said “Go and do as I have done” and breathed on the disciples, Jesus added on one more thing—a fourth thing—a somewhat unusual phrase of obligation. He said, *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 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 trespasses 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.

Now, if we take seriously what Christ did long ago on that first Easter evening—and if we believe he is asking the same things of us today—right

now—what needs to happen next? Well, I suggest one place to start is to be guided by the baselines given to us by the brave medical workers in our midst—and then step out beyond that by faith as ones who know the peace of Christ.

What are the baselines? In the news are heartbreaking stories of over-burdened emergency rooms and patients separated from their 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>1</sup>

If those simple acts are our bare minimum baselines—holding a cellphone to a dying loved one’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.

The verses from John’s gospel are truly meant 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 healing, 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. May those four moments from an Easter long ago still guide, challenge and direct our steps this day and always. Amen.

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<sup>1</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).