

A sermon preached by the Rev. Victor Horvath

Year B

2nd Easter

Apr. 19, 2009

Acts 4:32-35

Ps. 133

1 John 1:1-2:1

John 20:19-31

They're afraid -- the apostles are afraid

- And they've locked themselves in their room
- I'll just bet the shutters are closed, the curtains drawn and that they're speaking in whispers

And I suppose it makes sense -- in our modern language we'd say they've been traumatized

- They have seen their beloved teacher and friend arrested on trumped up charges
- Seen him publicly humiliated, mocked and tortured to death
- They have known their own cowardice -- how they all ran away and hid
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- and.... they had heard from each other what had happened that very morning
- how Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, and found the stone rolled away
- how she ran and told Peter and John, and how they ran back there -- it almost sounds like a relay race -- and went in, and saw that the burial wrappings had been cast aside
- these men, who had heard Jesus talk of resurrection and not really known what it meant, now witness its effects
- Mary lingers and meets someone she first thinks is the gardener, until he says her name and she knows him as Jesus, risen
- She tells the others.....And now they sit together in fear, locked away, hiding

John, the gospel writer, says they fear the Jews -- the authorities, the ones with power

- But I can't help wonder if they don't just a little bit fear Jesus as well
- He is the resurrected -- what? Person? Entity? Power? -- they just don't know what resurrection means, but he is it as he said he would be
- And they remember all too well, I am sure, how they ran away
- Hiding has become familiar to them

And suddenly, there he is, in their midst

- He's real -- not a ghost -- he shows them the wounds in his hands and side
- His body is palpable, solid in some way they can touch
- And I wonder if their fear level went up just a bit more ---
- He didn't knock, he didn't send round a note saying he'd drop by
- He just shows up, despite the door and the locks and the shutters
- Jesus, the Risen One, enters the tomb of their fear and regret, and greets them with the everyday greeting: *Shalom, Peace be with you.*

And this Risen One tells them he has something for them to do: *As the Father sent me, so I send you*

- I can see them rooting around for a scrap of paper write it down -- what's it going to be?
- Overthrow the Romans? Trash the house of the High Priest?
- The secret to doing resurrection? The solution for bringing world peace and harmony?
- Write 500 times "I will never run away again"?
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- No!..... his first words, his first task, is harder than all of those, and more life giving: Forgive
- *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them*
- Forgive the Romans? Forgive the Jews and their false charges?
- Forgive themselves for their cowardice?
- Un huh -- it would appear so.
- Forgive -- be people of forgiveness.

And Jesus adds a second phrase: *if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*

- Now the church over the centuries has heard that as meaning that we -- the church -- can decide if someone else is truly repentant, and refuse to forgive
- That we can set thresholds
- Now setting boundaries and limits on behavior may be helpful for any group of people, and I am sure the early church needed to set such limits
- But I find this concept of withholding forgiveness just contrary to so many other passages of scripture where God says *If you come back to me, I will love you*
- *Though your sins be red as scarlet, I will make them whiter than snow*

Now I'm no scripture scholar, and am not wise in ancient languages to understand the root meaning of the original words used here..... but in my heart, this is how I hear this phrase

- *If you hold on to the sins of others....those sins still hold on to you*
- *If you don't forgive, those actions of others still wrap their tentacles around your heart, your spirit, your soul*
- I hear it as a forceful reminder that forgiveness is what we are to be about
- and that avoiding the hard work of forgiving will only snarl us up.

I have know in my own life how the sins of others affected me -- the things they did to me, or the things they neglected to do

- and I have known my own sins
- and I know how they entombed me in anger, and grief; resentment and regret
- And I know how I just could not figure out on my own how to get out of that place
- Until God acted...in small, fleeting resurrection moments, coming at times unexpectedly, almost intrusively and certainly not understood
- moving me to the difficult work of coming to forgive
- of coming out of the tomb, into resurrected life

I suspect I am not alone in that: I'd wager we all have those tombs we hide in, where we stew and fret, are defensive and offensive all at the same time, and feel perfectly uncomfortable in our misery, saying "That -- THAT -- I just cannot ever forgive"

- and Jesus, the Risen One stands beside us and says *Peace be with you*
- *if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven*
- *if you hold on to them, they hold on to you*

And this isn't true only of us as individuals, it is true of us as a community, as a congregation gathered in His name:

- those of us who have been here awhile can probably come up with a hefty list of the sins of our predecessors -- the things our leaders, clergy or lay, did or didn't do
- things we are angry about, disappointed over, things we just can't let go of, much less forgive
- we can create quite a sizable tomb to stew in
- and Jesus, the Risen One stands beside us and says *Peace be with you*
- *if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven*

- *if you hold on to them, they hold on to you*
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- and if we arrived here more recently, I suspect we carry a sort of portable tomb with us, filled with the residue of the sins of people in other congregations
- things we are angry about, disappointed over, things we just can't let go of, much less forgive
- and Jesus, the Risen One stands beside us and says *Peace be with you*
- *if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven*
- *if you hold on to them, they hold on to you*
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- and as if that's not enough creepy dark dank tombs to talk about..... how quickly it can be that we create new ones together
- the harrumphs..... the *how dare you* ,...or, perhaps even worse, *How dare theys*..... the rolled eyes
- and Jesus, the Risen One stands beside us and says *Peace be with you*
- *if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven*
- *if you hold on to them, they hold on to you*

The apostles did not find it easy to learn how to live this life of resurrection

- despite the idyllic scene offered by our first lesson this morning, if we read further in the Book of Acts we know that they bickered, disagreed, fought with each other often enough
- it took them time to learn to forgive
- and it takes us time too
- the important thing may not be how long it takes, but that we cooperate with it
- that we let God raise us from our tombs, bring us forth
- and like new borns open ourselves to learning how to live this new life of resurrection

Early last week, after our glorious Easter celebration, there was a flurry of parish e-mail chatter, about the joy of having so many children with us, the Easter egg hunt, the glorious liturgy and the lavish coffee hour

- some marveled that it could be
- and somewhere in that flurry, one person noted “well, after all, we are a Resurrection people”
- Exactly!
- The prelude to that resurrection moment in that locked room was that simple little relay race in the early morning light

- Barely able to see, Mary Magadalen, then Peter, then John ran, out of breath with the good news
- Eager to tell others
- And we? We are just the latest in a long line, rushing to tell the next generation
- *Alleluia, Christ is Risen*
- *The Lord is Risen indeed, alleluia!*