

Second Sunday of Easter
April 3, 2016
Year C, RCL

E. Bevan Stanley

Acts 5:27-32
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

From the Gospel: “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.” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is so much packed into today’s Gospel reading and it is all so important, that I cannot think of doing much other than simply commenting on it as we go through it again.

First, notice the setting. It is the upper room, the same one where we had eaten the Last Supper. It is evening of the same day that John and Peter found the tomb empty, and Mary Magdalene has claimed to have seen Jesus alive. The doors are locked because we are afraid the Jews will round us up and have us crucified as well for fomenting insurrection. We are scared and confused. And suddenly, there he is. He did not come in; he simply is here, in our midst, big as life, and more alive than we can stand.

“Peace be with you,” he says. “Relax. It is I.” And then he says it again. He means it much more deeply. “God’s peace be with you. Whatever has troubled your relationship with God has been taken care of. Don’t worry about having run away. Don’t worry about anything at all. Everything will be okay.” This is what Jesus bought for us on the cross. Peace. Reconciliation. The burden of our guilt, large and small has been lifted. This is not just the first day of the week; it is the first day of a new world. “Behold, I make all things new.”

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” We are sent into the world as Jesus was. As human beings. As mortal flesh. This is the source of all our Christian mission. The Greek word for send is *apostello*, from which we get the word apostle. Apostles are people who are sent. In the Creed we say the church is apostolic not only because it adheres to apostolic teaching and tradition, but because it is also sent into the world. The Latin word for send is *mitto* from which we get words like mission and missionary. Jesus was sent by God into the world to reconcile the world to God. So the apostles, and we as followers of the apostles and members of the apostolic church, are also sent into the world to reconcile the world to God. That is a big job. So Jesus gives us the necessary tools. He breathes on us and says receive the Holy Spirit. We all received the Holy Spirit when we were baptized. We have God in us. We are inspired, which is literally breathed into by God. We are a holy people because we have the Holy Spirit. Take a deep breath, sit up straight. Realize in your own body that God the Holy Spirit is in you.

Jesus breathes on us. “Receive the Holy Spirit. Receive the same power that enabled me to do all those things. Receive the divine power of life, freedom, and joy.” We are sent as Jesus was. Human flesh filled with the Holy Spirit. Just as Adam was made of the earth and God’s breath, so we are given divine life to take with us into the world. Suddenly, we are filled with a joy that feels like flame. We are more alive than we have ever felt before. We feel we could do anything. Breathe on me, breath of God.

It's a good thing too, because now listen what we have to do. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any they are retained." We are given the Holy Spirit, because only by that power will we be able to forgive sins. Yet if we fail to use that power to forgive, the sins will remain and the world will not be reconciled to God. There is no way around it. If we are to do our job as Christians, we must forgive sins. This last is the most

important use of this power of the Spirit, and perhaps the most difficult and most rewarding: Forgive sins. Real forgiveness is often so difficult that we are given the Holy Spirit so that we are able to pull it off. Yet, if we fail to use that power to forgive, the sins will remain and the world will not be reconciled to God. There is no way around it. If we are to do our job as Christians, we must forgive sins.

Thomas missed this visit of Jesus on the evening of Easter Day. A week later Jesus shows up again. That would be today, a week after Easter. Again he says, "Peace be with you." It is his calling card. It's how you know it is Jesus. That and the wounds. "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." This tells us two things about Jesus after the resurrection. First, his body is not the same as it was before he died. He can appear in a room despite the fact that the doors are locked. On the other hand he still has a body. He is not a ghost. In discussing the resurrection, St. Paul will assert that there is a physical body and also a spiritual body. Maybe this new body of Jesus is a spiritual body.

Perhaps it is more important that for Jesus to be present with us, with anybody, it requires being able to touch a flesh and blood human being. There is no relationship with Christ that does not involve our bodies, and often somebody else's too. We discover the love of God as another human being touches us in compassion, hugs us in welcome or reconciliation, or lays hands on us for healing. And often we know that Jesus is with us when we recognize the wounds. Here I am. Touch me. Touch my wounds and know that it is I. We are sent into the world as Jesus was. When we claim to speak or act or pray in the name of Jesus, it will not be our words, or even our actions that will be our credentials. It will be our wounds, the wounds Jesus has healed and

especially the wounds we have borne for another, that are the signs that we are agents and emissaries of the One who suffered for us so that we might have abundant life and full joy.

Thomas recognizes his lord by the wounds and, with no need to put his fingers in the wounds, confesses his faith: “My Lord and my God!” When Jesus appears, doubt is not really a possibility. Take it from one who knows. If Jesus ever appears for you, it won't occur to you to examine his credentials. Then Jesus gives this word of hope and comfort to all who were not there on that first Easter or the week after, or who have never encountered the risen Lord: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” That is most of us.

This brings us to the conclusion of the passage, and in all probability the original ending of the book. Chapter 21 seems to have been added on as a kind of epilogue. John the Evangelist tells us that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not recorded. These that are written are recorded for a purpose. The whole book has been a book of signs. The purpose of the author in writing all this down was so that we the readers would believe that Jesus, the man from Nazareth, was and is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, the Son of God, the Lord of life. The purpose is that we might have life through that belief and faith and trust.

So here we are. It is the Lord's day. It is a week after Jesus rose from the dead. And Jesus is here with us, in our fellowship with one another, and in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. Jesus is here in the flesh and blood of our bodies inbreathed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is here in the word of Scripture. Jesus is manifested even in the wounds we bring, whether they be healed, scarred, or still bleeding. Jesus is here so that we may be certain beyond all doubt that death has been defeated, and that there is nothing to fear. God and the Good have prevailed, always prevails and will ever prevail over evil, over despair, and over all loss and suffering.

The Peace of the Lord be always with you.