

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, April 7, 2013
Christ Church, Tarrytown, NY
Text: John 20:19-31

In the story from John's Gospel that we've just heard, the disciples have gathered in someone's home on the evening of the first day of the week. Jesus has been executed. His body was put into a borrowed tomb. And the disciples are trying to get their minds and hearts around the possibility that in spite of all of that, Jesus might be alive. There are reports of an empty tomb. Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus' beloved and most devoted followers, who had stood at the foot of the cross at his death rather than running away in fear as had most of the others, told them that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken to her.

Can you imagine what it must have felt like in that room? Those who had been afraid that they, as Jesus' followers, would meet the same fate that he had and had abandoned him during his ordeal were still terrified. The text says that the doors of the house where they were gathered were locked for fear of the Jews – which refers to the religious authorities who had orchestrated Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. The disciples surely regretted walking away from Jesus when he had needed them the most. Their friend and teacher, who had never abandoned them, had suffered a humiliating, agonizing death. What pain that would have caused them.

And they must have been so confused. This wasn't how things were supposed to have turned out. And yet, there's also the faintest glimmer of hope that maybe some of what they're hearing is true, and that Jesus' death isn't the end of the story.

Into this churning caldron of conflicting emotions – fear, regret, grief, sadness, confusion, and a tiny bit of hope – comes the risen Christ. It's the Jesus they've known – he shows them his wounded hands and side. And yet it's not – how did he get past those locked doors? He greets them: "Peace be with you" – just as he would have said to them when they all came together after any ordinary separation.

Here's what Jesus doesn't do. He doesn't judge or criticize his followers for their fear and uncertainty and disbelief. He doesn't remind them of the ways they've failed him. He greets them as his beloved friends. He offers them peace. In the midst of their fear, regret, grief, sadness, confusion, and their glimmer of hope, he gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the text says that as God has sent Jesus, Jesus sends his followers.

In this story, the risen Christ offers the peace and the presence of God to the disciples who by all accounts should be considered failures, lacking in faith, without a clear sense of their identity or their calling even after three years in the constant presence of Jesus. The risen Christ offers the peace and the presence of God to these completely ordinary and imperfect people simply because of who God is, and because God so loves them.

That's what this story is about – love. That's what all of the Jesus story is about – love. When we read through the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, when we look at what he did and listen to what he taught, it's about love. When he told stories of what the kingdom of God was about, his emphasis wasn't on the afterlife or anything we would consider to be particularly religious. He talked about relationships in this life. He talked about caring for people – those we're closest to, those in need whom we know and don't know, those we don't especially like, and even those we consider to be our enemies. Jesus' life on this planet was about meeting need with love, meeting apathy with love, meeting

sorrow with love, meeting hatred with love. And even when the world insisted, “No – that’s not how we do things,” and killed him, God said, “Yes, this is how we do things,” and raised him from the dead. Death didn’t and couldn’t contain Jesus. It didn’t and couldn’t stop the work of love that he had begun and that we have the privilege to continue.

As we gather together today on this second Sunday of Easter, we are very much like those disciples in the story. While we might look pretty put together, some of us are dealing with personal circumstances that cause us to be anxious and fearful. Some of us are experiencing grief over a painful loss. Some of us are totally exasperated with ourselves for what we consider to be our failures, whether small or global. Some of us are weary and depressed. Some of us are in physical or emotional pain. Some of us don’t have a clue as to what the next right step is. And into our midst, the risen Christ comes, offering peace and the healing, cleansing, empowering breath of the Spirit – not because of who we are or what we’ve done or haven’t done, but because of who God is, and because God loves us as we are – right here and right now. The love of God that Jesus’ life and death embodied has been breathed into our world. And that makes the story of God’s love our story as well.

The difference is, of course, that the disciples’ experience with the risen Lord was so dramatic, and ours tends to be ... not very. They were able to actually see and touch Jesus. Being in the physical presence of the risen Christ transformed them and compelled them to radically and generously give away their lives just as he did – in and for love.

Our encounter with the risen Lord this morning and in the days to come may be less dramatic, but it’s no less real. The Spirit of God is moving among us here as we receive the body and blood of Christ and affirm together that the way of love has overcome even death. We are being transformed as we receive the breath of that same Spirit, surrendering our ego-driven expectations and agendas and being present to and participating in the way of love, as it’s expressed in offering and receiving forgiveness, in telling the truth, in sharing so that all will have enough, in being with others in their pain and allowing others to be with us in ours.

Christ is risen! The way of love has overcome even death. The love of God that Jesus’ life and death embodied has been breathed into our world, so that it’s our story, too. The presence and work of the Spirit of God in our lives and in the world is real, though often subtle, and it is transforming us even now.

A poem called “spring songs” by Lucille Clifton captures for me the reality of the love that has been breathed into our world by the Spirit:

the green of Jesus
is breaking the ground
and the sweet
smell of delicious Jesus
is opening the house and
the dance of Jesus music
has hold of the air and
the world is turning
in the body of Jesus and
the future is possible

May we breathe deeply of the Holy Spirit. May we be people who practice resurrection – the way of love - that always has the last word. Amen.