

Second Sunday of Easter

April 8, 2018

John 20:19-31; Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1-2:2

Grace to you and peace...

The morning of September 11, 2001 was the first office day of my internship at Mount Olive Lutheran church, just down the street. After witnessing the unthinkable on broadcast news I had a terrible sense that I – pastor-in-training that I was – was supposed to have some idea of what to do. Bewildered and nearly immobilized by the same shock the whole nation was feeling, I managed to get myself into my brand new office. I sat there, floundering, trying to tune my radio to gather more information.

A few minutes later my supervising pastor arrived, barking orders as he rushed in: Unlock the sanctuary doors; make a sign inviting people to prayer; create a list of members who can take turns at the door welcoming those who are seeking a place to pray...

The following Sunday, and for several weeks after that horrific day, churches were filled much more than usual. In the face of tragedy, it seems that people are drawn to community.

We've seen it since 9/11 as well. When the horrific and unthinkable happen people of compassion come together to keep vigil, to light candles, to pray, to find comfort in being together...perhaps trying to make sense of the tragedy, or seeking ways to respond. Somehow we feel the need to come together to give witness to that which is not right, to acknowledge evil when it occurs. To simply not be alone.

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week,” the disciples found themselves gathered together behind locked doors. The unthinkable had happened when their teacher and friend was crucified...and now they were struggling to comprehend the meaning of the empty tomb where his body had been laid. They had heard Mary’s witness to the good news, “I have seen the Lord!” but nothing as yet made sense. Fear for their own lives, uncertainty about their future, confusion about Mary’s bizarre proclamation...they gathered together seeking comfort in community. What could this possibly mean?

Into the locked room, filled with fear and grief and confusion, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” When Jesus showed them his wounds, suddenly the disciples recognized him, and their fear turned to rejoicing. In the midst of the gathered community they received what they didn’t even know they needed. In the gathered community they saw the Risen Christ.

But Thomas missed it. He was not with them when Jesus came. We’re never told what kept Thomas away; we can only wonder. Maybe he was just busy with other things. But sometimes people feel the need to withdraw from community when faced with hardship or tragedy. Perhaps they don’t want others to see their grief or fear. Maybe they believe they need to face their challenges on their own. Maybe they are reluctant to be vulnerable – or perhaps they don’t realize their grief is shared. For whatever reason, Thomas was not with the gathered community when Jesus came among them.

Of course the others shared their news with him, but just hearing about their experience was not enough. Thomas needed

something more. But he wasn't alone. Remember, Mary was so overcome with grief when she stood outside the empty tomb that she didn't recognize Jesus until he spoke her name. Remember too that Mary's declaration that she had seen the Lord was not sufficient to ease the grief and calm the fears of the disciples. Thomas, too, needed to experience the presence of the Risen Christ in order to trust the truth of the good news. And it was within the gathered community that Jesus gave Thomas exactly what he needed.

Because the truth of the resurrection is not an event to be proven, it's a relationship to experience.

Notice that in each of the gospel accounts, the appearance of the Risen One is not the end of the story. Each account has some version of sending, of commissioning the witnesses to go and invite others into relationship as well. Jesus brings peace to the gathered community and tells them, "As Abba God has sent me, so I send you." He breathes out his spirit on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and as he does, the gathered community is breathed into life. The Wounded Christ meets the disciples in the gathered community and transforms fear and confusion into trust and joy.

Each of the texts appointed for today give a glimpse of what it means to be the community gathered around the Risen Christ. Once people begin to trust that death is not the last word, and that Love is stronger than hate, the possibilities for authentic life together abound and overflow.

According to the Book of Acts, the earliest believers were inspired by the resurrection to be "of one heart and soul" and to share all

their possessions common, so that no one in their community would be in need. The community addressed by the second reading was bound together by the witness of those who had “seen with [their] eyes, what they have looked at and touched with [their] hands, concerning the word of life – that is, those who have seen the Risen Christ. But they are bound not only by the testimony of their words, but by the experience of love, forgiveness, and joy that was born out of their witness. They shaped their life together around the shared understanding that forgiveness is found within the light that comes from God.

Just as the community of believers in Acts practiced gracious generosity, so the community of believers in 1 John practiced honest confession and abundant mercy. These are the characteristics of Beloved Community that are possible when we gather together in the presence of the Risen Christ.

But oh my friends, such community takes practice! It is not easy to live into the reality of Easter. Christ has risen – Christ has risen indeed, but we still frequently find ourselves locked behind doors of fear or withdrawn into our own private grief. The miracle of the resurrection happened once, but each one of us gets to return to the mystery and promise as many times as we need to.

Jesus comes to the disciples huddled in fear, proclaiming peace and giving them the breath of his spirit, and still, after being filled with joy, the next week finds them again gathered together behind locked doors. The simple truth is that the Wounded Christ comes to us again and again, raising us up from our challenges and fears, turning us over and over again toward the light of Christ, especially when the cares of the world threaten to overcome us.

Christ comes to us in the gathered community as we tell the truth about our brokenness and failures, only to find that we are embraced rather than rejected. Christ comes to us in the gathered community as we share what we have and find that together we have more than enough. Christ comes to us as we open our hearts to those who have not been with us before, but who are longing for a place in which to make sense of the confusion and chaos of life. Christ comes to us in the gathered community as we share our surprising stories of transformation in unexpected ways, as we hold each other when we cry, as we receive Christ in bread and wine and become what we have received.

Within the gathered community we proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. It is in the cycle of gathering, encounter, and sending that the Risen Christ becomes present to the whole world. Let it be so among us.

Amen.