

Online Reflection April 24th 2022, Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-23 and Ezekiel 37:1-10 (readings set for Book of Common Prayer)

I don't know about you, but Easter already seems like a very long time ago. We've had a whole week go by since then, a week filled for some of us with holiday time, perhaps catching up with family and friends. Others might have been right back at work on Tuesday. While for all of us, the news cycle crashes on, with daily reports of warfare, aggression, and political shenanigans. A week on from Easter, what has changed?

The disciples must have asked themselves that question on that first Easter Day. Our NT reading from John shows them gathered in secret behind locked doors. They were still in shock following Jesus' crucifixion, fearing that they might be next to be hunted down by the powers that be. On top of that, they were trying to make sense of the disturbing news of an empty tomb and some strange sightings, surely the products of grief and loss. But they knew that Jesus was dead, and they were alone. Surely, they knew that nothing had changed.

This Eastertide, I can't help wondering, as I read about the disciples huddled in their locked room, about all those who are even at this moment taking shelter in bomb shelters or basements, feeling themselves powerless in the face of overwhelming military aggression. I can't help wondering about those in hiding from authorities who would seek to grab them and deport them thousands of miles away from safety. And I can't help wondering about all those who feel imprisoned by anxiety, depression, or loneliness. It is Easter, but what has changed?

John, as he so often does, turns things upside down in a few quiet words: 'Jesus came and stood among them...' John doesn't describe Jesus appearing with a blinding flash and lots of heavenly special effects. Jesus doesn't break down the door, or walk through the walls. Jesus doesn't even appear in answer to the disciples' fervent prayers. It's just that, as John describes it, 'Jesus came and stood among them'. Six simple words that changed everything for this motley group of bewildered and frightened ordinary men and women.

In one sense nothing had changed: they were still a small persecuted minority group. They were still in danger. They were still in a locked house. But now they had a centre. Now they were gathered around Jesus. And as he was somehow just there with his disciples, Jesus does two things. He showed them his wounds. And he blessed them, 'Peace be with you.' Remember that

the men, at least, among the disciples, had deserted Jesus and fled. Apart from John, it was the women who had kept watch at the cross. Yet Jesus does not rebuke the disciples for their fear or lack of faith. He doesn't tell them off for hiding behind a locked door. Instead, he blesses them with peace. It's more than a vague benevolence, it echoes the Old Testament shalom: healing, wholeness, salvation. 'Peace be with you': God's healing, God's wholeness, God's salvation, God's shalom, that can change everything.

John has already related how Jesus, before his betrayal, promised his disciples peace: 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you' (14:27). In a sense this scene in the locked room on Easter Day is a pay-off to all Jesus' promises on Maundy Thursday. Before he was betrayed, Jesus spoke at length about the Holy Spirit, who he would send to them. And there is this beautiful image in the locked room of Jesus breathing on his disciples, saying 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. It's a foreshadowing of the first Pentecost, and it echoes God's breath in the OT as God giving life to the dead or to inanimate objects – the Hebrew 'ruach' means both 'spirit' and 'breath'. We might remember Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones which are turned into a vast living multitude by the breath of God. All this is going on when Jesus breathes on the disciples: 'receive the Holy Spirit'.

The disciples are not judged for their failure. Instead, Jesus comes that first Easter evening with peace, with healing and wholeness, and with the Holy Spirit, which in the words of the creed, 'gives life to the people of God.' In one sense, looking out at Jerusalem, nothing had changed. But inside that locked room, everything had. It wasn't long before that crowd of previously cowed disciples found themselves changed into courageous witnesses to the life and peace of Jesus Christ. And because of them, we are gathered together here this evening, as is a vast multitude across the world today. Everything has changed.

If we look at the news, and perhaps at our own lives, we still see too many things that have not changed. People still hide in locked rooms in fear. People still choose sin over shalom. Tragedy still strikes. Before I was ordained, the very first time I ever preached on Easter Day was in 2012 and I was very proud, too proud, to do so. And I wore my academic hood for the first time. It was a present from my father, ahead of my ordination and it had just arrived. It felt like a special day. Then after the service I had a phone call to tell me that my father had just died unexpectedly. An hour's drive found me with my sister at his bedside. We said prayed, and I placed a cross left over from Palm

Sunday in his hands. There were no heavenly visions. But in the face of shock and grief, there was the hope of Easter.

Tragedy still strikes. That does not change. But because of Jesus, tragedy, evil, even death itself will never have the final word in our lives. God's love, God's Spirit, God's shalom, these are our final words. This is the change that Easter brings.

What might this mean for us? We might find ourselves gently encouraged to open the doors to our locked rooms, to come out from behind whatever barriers we have been using to protect ourselves. We might find ourselves wondering how we can show peace, help in healing, or build each other up. We might find out more about living out our faith or try new ways of prayer. We might look for opportunities to help people affected by tragedy or evil. You might do all this already. For me, these would be changes indeed!

But Easter is all about change. An experienced and wise priest once told me that the opposite of faith was not doubt: the opposite of faith, he thought, was fear. Fear cannot trust. Fear keeps us closed up. That seems to have been where the disciples were. They were not in a place where they could welcome the Lord. When Jesus gently, miraculously, stands among them, fear flees from the Holy Spirit. In the power of that Spirit, the disciples are sent out by Jesus into a world stricken by sin, a world in desperate need of forgiveness.

Easter was a long time ago but Easter is also always now. 'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you'. We are sent out from our locked rooms. '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.' We are sent out to show and share God's love and forgiveness, and by so doing to bring sin under the judgement of God. We live in a fearful world where sin and death are still very strong. But sin and death will never have the final word. God's shalom will have the final word, because Easter is now, and we are always an Easter people. Amen.