

Easter 1 (2021)

If St. John's Gospel ended where we left off reading last Sunday on Easter Day, we would be left with more of a puzzle than with Good News.

Mary Magdalene, as you will remember, came very early to the tomb expecting to find a corpse. Instead, she found the stone rolled away and Jesus' body missing.

In a state of panic and confusion, she ran and roused Peter and John and summoned them to come and see.

When they arrived at the tomb, they found it just as she had said. It was empty.

The really puzzling thing was that the grave clothes were still wound as they had been when a body had been present within them.

More than that, the napkin that had been around the face, had been folded and carefully placed to the side.

What did it all mean?

Before leaving the tomb John seems to have had a burst of embryonic understanding and faith.

Remembering Jesus' words about rising from dead, spoken as they made their way towards Jerusalem . . . could this be what had happened?

The two then went home with more questions than answers.

Thankfully, the story does not end with last Sunday's Gospel.

Instead of ending with series of question marks, St. John's Gospel ends with an impressive array of exclamation points.

We find that John's hunch was right. Jesus was alive and on the move!

In the verses just preceding where we picked up reading, He appeared to Mary Magdalene. She apparently had stayed behind in the garden after the other two had gone home.

Then, He appeared, on the evening of the same day, to all of the disciples minus Thomas.

Locks on the door could not keep the risen Jesus out.

More alive than ever, He greets them with ‘Shalom’ or ‘Peace’!

At this point, we need to pause and consider the significance of this greeting. It was a common and customary one among the Jews of Jesus’ day. But I think we would be wrong in hearing it only as that.

Think back. What did the disciples do following their Master’s arrest in the garden?

They all, with the exception of John and Peter, fled. They acted cowardly.

Peter did not flee, but did something worse. He denied even knowing his Lord, not once but three times.

Following this lacklustre performance, one could imagine the disciples feeling discomfort at the thought of meeting up with Jesus.

But, they had nothing to fear. Jesus’ victory over sin and death outshone whatever they had or had not done.

Rather than scolding them, He comes with a word of comfort, encouragement and joy. Peace with an exclamation point!

What that meant to the disciples was joy.

What it means to us is that when we stray, when we prove faithless, when we let Him down, we can have confidence that He will not abandon us or put us on a shelf.

**“His property is always to have mercy.”**

**“He is more ready to forgive than we to ask.”**

**“He desires not the death of a sinner,”** the Book of Common Prayer, echoing Scripture, reminds us over and over again.

Good news for us ‘miserable offenders’!

No, He bears with our weaknesses and comes offering us His peace.

Friday afternoon I was in the churchyard working on the herb garden when a man came up and struck up a conversation.

He was getting his taxes done by the AARP group working out of Thomason Hall.

After some general remarks about my newspaper columns and gardening, the conversation shifted to spiritual things.

He said he once had great joy and warmth in his walk with God, but a foolish thing he had done, a serious misstep, had caused that joy and warmth to go away, even though he had confessed that sin.

Right then and there, I prayed with him, asking that the joy of his salvation might be restored.

I further reminded him that it is Satan, not Christ, who dredges up the mistakes of the past and keeps bringing them before us. That is why the Bible calls him the ‘accuser of the brethren’.

It didn’t occur to me at the time to mention Jesus’ word to the wayward disciples in today’s Gospel, but it would have been appropriate.

Jesus still brings peace.

What about you? Has a wall come up between you and your God?

If so, don’t leave it there. Let Him take it away. Receive His peace this morning.

If you have confessed the failures of the past, let them go. The old account has been settled. There is nothing more to be done, but to go forward and open your heart to His presence and peace.

But, we find something else going on in today's Gospel as well. Jesus does not just proclaim peace, He commissions the disciples as agents of His peace.

He sends them out as witnesses.

Notice what He says in verse 21: **“Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.”**

He transfers to them the power and authority He has been given by His Father: **“Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.”**

They are to go and proclaim healing, restoration, forgiveness, peace in His name.

That remains our calling as well.

In this past week's session of The Bible Course, the presenter in the video series we are using, a young man by the name of Andrew Ollerton, used the lowly dandelion as an illustration of how this witnessing business works.

You've seen them, I'm sure.

As a child, you probably blew on one and watched in amazement as the spores went into the air and spread out.

Well, that's a good picture of our calling as baptised believers. We are to breathe out God's peace into the world.

*What if* this began happening in our lives?

Well, for one thing the pews of this church would be full every Sunday, life in this community would be richer, blessings would multiply, many more would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and above all we would know that peace that passes all understanding in our own lives.

Why not give it a chance? Take a deep breath. Blow on your dandelion!

Allow me to close with some words you have probably have heard, words attributed to St. Francis:

Lord make Me an instrument of Your peace  
Where there is hatred let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine master grant that I may  
Not so much seek to be consoled as to console  
To be understood, as to understand.  
To be loved, as to love.

For it's in giving that we receive  
And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned  
And it's in dying that we are born...  
To eternal life. ///

May we give an hearty 'Amen' to every line of this prayer.

Christ is risen from the dead! Alleluia!

Risen with Him let us arise and go forth as witnesses.