

A Spirit of Peace  
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A week ago: Easter.

The sun rose like any other day, showing us the mist that also rises from the valley.

The graveyard is a beautiful place at that time,  
though the walk up the hill takes some effort.

In the graveyard, we had a glimpse of the mystery, sang some notes of hope, tasted a bit of glory.

Then we walk down, down to life as we know it.

The evening comes, the shadows darken, and we know that we have not changed.

We retreat to the familiar house of the narrow life.

What is your locked door?

How do you contain the wounds and fears and shame  
that come with living in this world, in these bodies?

What room feels safe enough when you are grieving,  
or confused or in pain?

Can memory enter in through the locked door? Certainly it can.

We remember the violence, the abuse, the suffering, the powerlessness.

Those sights and those feelings won't leave us alone.

And with all that comes anger. Against those who harm, against fate,  
even against ourselves for weakness, even against God for indifference.

What is strong enough to walk through your locked door?

Who can breach those barriers:

the planks of self-defense, the padlock of terror, the hinges of shame?

We should not be surprised that he comes looking for us.

That compelling presence has called us before,

taken us out of the grooves and ruts of our expectations,

sent us down pathways of enlightenment and awakening.

We should not be surprised at the familiar greeting, "Peace be with you."

We should not be surprised, but we flinch at the sight of those wounds.

They almost distract us from the warmth of his words: "Peace be with you."

The chambers of our memory are unlocked... when has he spoken of peace before?

Now we remember: at that last meal he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.

I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

And then he said, "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace.

In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"

He has sought us out in the place of our fear, and brings the antidote: his presence and his peace.

He comes wounded and transformed, but somehow we know him,

and the first small whispers of joy begin to be heard.  
The first smallest sense of release begins to be felt.  
He has sought us out in the locked room, and he speaks, and we can hear.  
But with peace comes a mission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Our ears breathe in his words, our lungs breathe in his Spirit. "Receive!" he entreats us.  
"Open yourselves to this. It is the way of life for any and all."  
What power this brings: forgiving sin, retaining sin.  
We breathe it in, and we are terrified.

What is he asking us, with those quiet words and that wounded body?  
Where is he sending us, with the wind of peace pushing us along?  
Where can I begin?  
With the soldier who pinned down that bloody hand to the wood?  
With the politician who rinsed his hands clean of guilt?  
With myself, for running away in panic?  
With God, who created humanity with such flaws and such terrible freedom?  
Who can I forgive?

But his words have unlocked the chamber of memory, and transformed it,  
and we remember his ministry of forgiveness.  
We remember each one looking for release,  
each one looking for healing, each one looking for peace.  
And we remember the way he saw their pain, and healed with forgiveness.  
Free grace offered in each place of pain.  
We remember that he has already forgiven the soldiers with hammer and nails, from the cross.  
But, try as we might, we cannot remember a single time that sins were retained.  
We cannot remember seeing any chains of refusal or grudges or a single closed door.  
Not until we went into hiding.

"As the Father sent me, so I send you."  
Is this why we are given this living, breathing, Spirited power?  
So that we can open the door and leave this place?  
He is binding us together with peace, breathing life back into us,  
and sending us into a frightening world.  
I can only leave with my friends at my side – my forgiven and recently fearful friends.  
I can only leave if they, too, have a ministry of forgiveness, and they first use it on me.  
I cannot leave if any sins are retained, because that will strangle us,  
and the new community we hope to create.

And yet, as we leave the locked room, we hear the words the world speaks, and hear the dissonance.  
He does not give peace as the world gives. The world offers its own certainties and cures.  
The world says, "dominate." "If persuasion and manipulation and deception don't work,  
try something stronger: try force."  
But we hear a more compelling voice, we remember the body wounded by force,  
and we try peace, we try forgiveness.  
The world says, "Retaliate." "If someone offends you, don't let them win.  
Try revenge, strike back, get even, or more than even."

But the power that has been breathed into us speaks another way, we remember the one who sought no revenge, and we try peace, we try forgiveness.

There are those among us who did not hear the peace, breathe the breath, see the wounds.  
There is one who only knows what we have said: "We have seen the Lord."  
He still wanders in pain, he still agonizes in doubt, he still suffers that absence.  
As we did, he needs more than a second-hand word.  
He needs to feel the physical presence,  
he hungers for words of comfort, he craves the touch of peace from its source.

A week ago: Easter.

Every emotion has been experienced in these days:  
the depths of grief, the dark fear, the glimmer of hope, the burning shame, the crippling anger,  
the return of joy, an enthusiasm about the future, the freedom of the Spirit.  
But we return to this marvel, this great good news: He came looking for us.  
And we hold fast to this treasure, this great good news:  
he will come looking for each one that cowers in rooms of pain, doubt, and fear.  
Our friend will receive his blessing.  
And each one that comes after will receive their blessing.

He comes looking for us and sends us out of the locked room –  
into a world of disease, despair, injustice, intolerance and heartache and loneliness.  
He sends us with forgiveness for the ways we wound our lives, the lives of others and the life of the world itself. He is also giving us that terrible power to retain sin –  
and how often we would like to use it!  
Each abused child, each bombed city, each blighted landscape seem to call out for it.

But then we remember. He came looking for us, that Easter evening.  
He didn't write us off. He didn't leave us alone. He didn't retain our sin.  
He looked for us, and he found us and he set us free.  
Thanks be to God.

Amen.