

...So I Send You  
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All over the country today, and all over the world, people in churches are reading this passage from the Gospel of John. All over the place, because it is the Sunday after Easter, people are hearing the story of this resurrection appearance of Jesus, not at the tomb, to a group of women, but in a closed room, to a group of men. Last week, at the early morning Easter service up at Hillside Cemetery, we read about Mary Magdalene, weeping in a garden by the tomb, bewildered and sad. We heard about her recognition of her Rabbi Jesus, and her excited, but unbelievable report to the rest of the disciples: "I have seen the Lord!"

All over the country and world today, preachers will be talking about the disciple Thomas. Doubting Thomas. They will be talking about the relationship of doubt and faith, and what belief looks like. Which is a fascinating subject.

But today, I am drawn to the first half of this reading, the first appearance of the wounded Lord. What exactly was going on with that greeting, "Peace be with you," and that commission, "As the Father sent me, so I send you," and that breathing, "Receive the Holy Spirit"? Everyone knows that breath is needed for life – Bible readers know it from the Genesis chapter 2 account of Creation and the Ezekiel story of new creation in the valley of bones. There seems to be here, a symbolic representation of the life breath that God provided at the first creation and the re-creation of the people of God. Through Jesus, God is now once again enlivening a new creation -- a new community. There is more here than physical proofs of a miraculous event, than a belief in the possibility of bodily resurrection. We are talking about something more fundamental here, and more directly applicable to our lives as Christians.

When I read those words, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained," it sends me in the direction, not of doubt vs. proof, but of forgiveness. These disciples had all abandoned Jesus in his hour of trial. They were afraid, and they continued to be afraid, paralyzed behind locked doors. Probably, even after hearing the wonderful announcement of Mary Magdalene, they were ashamed. Not surprising, they thought to themselves, that our friend would appear to this brave loyal woman. But to us – no. How could we expect to be reunited with the one whom we deserted?

For them, this appearance, this sound of words of peace was an experience of forgiveness. That greeting – the most common, everyday greeting – "peace be with you," washed over them like a balm, like release. And he says it again! – in case they did not get the full import the first time. And he **trusts** them, **entrusts** them, with a sending out like his own: as the father sent me, so I send you. This, more than anything else tells them how deep this forgiveness goes.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote: "There is no hope of understanding the Resurrection outside the process of renewing humanity in forgiveness. We are all agreed that the empty tomb proves nothing. We need to add that no amount of apparitions, however

well authenticated, would mean anything either, apart from the testimony of forgiven lives communicating forgiveness.”

So it is no surprise that the next sentence after that “sending” comes an explicit empowerment. It is John’s Pentecost moment, on the same day as the empty tomb, the forgiven disciples are blessed with a Spirit beyond their own limited powers. How does this Holy Spirit show up? In the releasing of sin, in forgiveness. Or- if they choose, in the retention of sin, in ongoing condemnation.

It has been said that religion is largely filled with people who are afraid of hell, and spirituality is for people who have gone through hell. In that case, the disciples in that closed room were experts in spirituality. They had descended to the depths of sorrow and fear and shame, and now they were being hauled back into the light by forgiveness. They experienced the joy in being forgiven, the joy of knowing how powerful that is. They breathed deeply of the Spirit. They received a commission to go out into the world, with a mission of more forgiving. Because after you yourself have had your sins forgiven, could you really retain the sins of another? Wouldn’t you want that joy for everyone? This was the power behind the persistence of Peter and the other disciples in our reading from Acts. They were imprisoned, they were beaten, they were reviled. They just would not quit being “witnesses to these things” – to the exaltation of Jesus “at God’s right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” As God had sent Jesus, so they were sent. So **we** are sent.

It turns out that resurrection is first and foremost about relationship rather than belief or doubt. This led me to reconsider our friend Thomas. What if Thomas’ doubt were not about the possibility of a executed and resurrected Messiah, but about the possibility that that Messiah came in forgiveness, not judgment? What if he could not quite believe that this wounded man would forgive and restore the relationship, renewed and even more potent? Thomas, who had already been called, who had already followed and learned, now underwent a conversion experience.

Here is what Christians throughout the centuries have discovered: conversion is also recruitment. As God sent Jesus, so he sends us. We are sent out on a mission. We are sent out to re-create just as we have been re-created.

What are we creating when we go out? Changed human beings, changed human relationships. This can be on the most intimate, person-to-person level, or on the broadest social level, or even broader environmental level. Things have happened that crucify love, or crucify social groups and races, or crucify the planet. But God tells us, through the appearance of a wounded, loving friend in a dark room, that crucifixion is not the end. We can forgive and we can ask for forgiveness. And we can live again through the power of forgiveness.

When we talk about the missions of the Norwich Congregational Church, in many ways they are missions of reconciliation. With the help of Jeff Nielsen, we have reached out to the people of Viet Nam through the Peace Trees project. After a war, with pain and suffering on both sides, forgiveness is needed on both sides. We could choose to either “release” or “retain” the sins of war. Peace Trees has chosen to release the sin so that unexploded ordnance can be removed, so that farming and resume and kindergartens be built. The Holy Spirit breathes through us when we support this work.

We know that these kind of missions benefit both sides. This week, we will send teenagers and adults to the Dominican Republic to work in poor village schools. I say, **we** will send, because we are the sponsoring organization. But, in truth, a larger Spirit breathes through the desires to share with those who have few opportunities compared to us. We recognize our privilege, not because we may have to repent, but because of the joy of giving, because of the joy of new and renewed relationships.

The risen Christ comes to us today once again in the Holy Sacrament of Communion. He comes to say to us, "Peace be with you." Not only that, he comes to call us. He comes to recruit us to help spread the news. He comes to ask us to extend this word of healing, life-giving forgiveness to others. And so we bring to the table the offering of ourselves, an offering of "the testimony of forgiven lives communicating forgiveness," as Rowan Williams said.

So today, on the second Sunday of Easter, what does the empty tomb mean? What does an apparition in a garden or a closed room mean? It means everything: a future, a relationship, a calling, a sending. It means the dawn of forgiveness as a way of life. Thanks be to God.