

Breaking Through the Silence

John 20:19-23

When my wife Amy was growing up, her mom would come into her room each night and draw a cross on her forehead and say, “God bless you.” On occasion, Amy will do this with our kids: Kallie and Wiley, and whenever she does, they both do it back to her, but then Wiley will say, “Remember what God said. Every time you eat this think of me: bread. And every time you drink this think of me: red wine or grape juice. Jesus said this at the last supper.” Then Wiley will lay down and go to bed.

Last Sunday coming home from Church, I asked him why he always tells us this. He replied, “Because this is a really important part of the Bible, and I don’t want you to forget it.” Then he paused and said, “But Easter is pretty important too.”

Our Scripture this morning picks up where we our Easter scripture left off last week, Mary goes to the tomb to find the stone rolled away. Upset she goes and tells Peter and John. And together they run back to the tomb to find it empty. So Peter and John return to their homes. But Mary sticks around, and it is then that she meets the risen Lord. Jesus tells her to go and share what has happened with the others, which she did. And this is where our scripture begins, but before we look at what happens next, I want to go back to the Last Supper.

In their time together, Jesus and his disciples had shared so many meals, but on this night, even beyond it being Passover, everything was different. Jesus didn’t speak to them in parables as he had done so many times before, but instead he answered their questions with direct answers. More... he talked with them about how one would betray him and how one would deny him, and he spoke with them about how he would be leaving soon and about the Holy Spirit that the Father would give to them. I can only imagine the confusion that they must have felt. They didn’t understand why this night was so different. They had no idea that this would be the last time that they would share a meal with Jesus in this manner, or that the next time they would all eat together everything would be changed. They had no idea that Jesus was preparing them for his arrest, trial, death, resurrection, and beyond.

As the Student Bible says, “The world was about to undergo a convulsive trauma and the eleven fearful men with him were his hope for this world... Jesus concluded his words [with them that night] with a ringing declaration, ‘Take heart! I have overcome the world’. How hollow this statement would seem the next evening, when his pale, abused body hung on an executioner’s cross. The disciple’s emotions—and faith—would rise and plummet in one unforgettable day.”

And so we leave the Last Supper and move through Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion knowing that his disciples would deny him, abandon him, and flee in fear because their Lord, the one they had left everything to follow was dead.

Over the next few days nobody knows what went through the disciple's minds or any of Jesus' followers for that matter because their hopes and their dreams for a better life were laid to rest in a tomb sealed with a giant stone.

After meeting the risen Lord, as we have said, Mary went and told the disciples what had happened. Did they believe her? Maybe. But what we know is that when our scripture begins, we find the disciples all hiding together behind locked doors for fear that they too might suffer death as Jesus had.

And then all of a sudden there he was. Jesus was standing before them and he said, "Peace be with you!"

In my sermon, this past Good Friday, I wanted to wrestle with pain and suffering in our world asking the question does Good Friday, in and of itself, offer us any answers for what appears to be God's silence in the midst of our pain and suffering?

What I came away with is that without Easter, Good Friday offers us a God who out of love for us willingly gave the life of his son so that he too could know what it feels like to suffer pain and loss. On Good Friday we learn that God does not abandon us to our pain, but that God chooses to suffer with us. But without Easter, Good Friday leaves us with no hope for tomorrow. Without Easter, God is silent.

But Jesus appeared to them behind locked doors and said, "Peace be with you!"

Words of comfort... words of security... words of assurance letting them know that everything was going to be okay. For the disciples this journey had been a long one: a constant struggle trying to understand and accept who Jesus was, but more... trying to understand what Jesus expected of them. And after his death all the question about what would become of them. And so when he appears, what they experienced for the first time in three days and maybe even longer than that was peace. The disciples looked at his wounds and they knew that this truly was Jesus standing before them. The mystery of his resurrection had not taken away the scars of rejection and death nor had it transformed him into someone else. This was the one in whom they had left everything to follow. This was the one with whom they had shared a meal just four days earlier. Jesus was with them again. And when they realized this, they forgot their fears, they forgot their doubts, they forgot their pain, and they were comforted by the one who had changed their lives and the lives of so many others.

For us today, part of the difficulty is that even though we believe and we confess that Jesus is with us, he is not here with us in the same manner that he was with his

disciples. The comfort and sense of peace that the disciples felt that night came from seeing him in person. It came from knowing that their hopes and dreams for tomorrow were not dead because Jesus was alive, and he was right there with them.

Jesus is still with us today speaking to us, caring for us, and holding us, but without being able to see and touch him, God can still seem silent.

But on that first Easter when Jesus appeared to his disciples behind locked doors, something else happened. A new community was born. Up until that moment, they had lost all resemblance to a community. They were gathered together but only out of their sense of fear.

But now upon seeing the risen Christ, they are renewed, strengthened, and ready to go out into the world together as followers of the Risen Lord doing whatever he calls them to do. Little did they know that his plan was to turn his mission over to them.

Tom was asleep in bed when there was a knock at the door. He rolled over and looked at his clock. It was three thirty in the morning, so he tried to go back to sleep. A minute later, the knock comes again, but this time much louder. So his wife asks him, "Aren't you going to answer that?" Finally, he drags himself out of bed and goes downstairs. He opens the door and a man is standing there. By the smell of his breath it is obvious that he's been drinking. "Hi there," the stranger slurs, "can you please give me a push?" Tom says, "No, I can't give you a push, it's three thirty in the morning." And he slams the door. As he climbs back into bed, his wife asks him what happened. He explains, and she says, "Tom, that wasn't very nice. Remember that night we broke down in the pouring rain on the way to pick up the kids from the baby sitter, and you had to knock on that man's door to get us started again? What if he told us no, and slammed the door in our faces?" "But he's been drinking," explained Tom. "It doesn't matter, he needs our help, and God tells us to help those in need." Grudgingly, Tom climbs out of bed, gets dressed, goes downstairs, and opens the door. When he doesn't see the man, he calls out, "Hey, do you still need that push?" "Yes sir," the man replies. "Well where are you?" Tom asked. "I'm over here on your swing."

The time had come for Jesus to give the disciples a little push. He said to them, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit."

In the church we believe that after the resurrection, Jesus remained on earth for around another 7 weeks before ascending into heaven, and it was shortly after this that the Holy Spirit is given to his disciples, but the writer of John can't wait until Pentecost to share the Good News of God's plan with us. According to the Gospel of John, what we are witnessing is the birth of the church. The crucified and now risen Christ is present, his disciples have gathered and have been charged with going out into the world

pronouncing the forgiveness of sins, and the Holy Spirit has been given as a guide and a counselor along the way.

The words of peace that Jesus has given to the disciples are not meant for them alone, but they are meant to be spoken through them to any who are crouched behind closed doors in fear... to any who are searching for hope in their lives... to any who don't understand that death is not the end.

As Walter Brueggeman says, "Jesus brought peace to his disciples and now he has charged them to be bearers of that same peace to the world. His appearance does more than to simply attest that he is risen; it evokes a transformation among the disciples and confronts them with an unparalleled commission. Something new and unheard of has happened—not only resurrection, but also empowerment for the future. The disciples as the nucleus of the church are to bring the benefits of Christ to the world."

In his day, Jesus showed how profoundly lives could be changed when divine love—divine peace takes human form. Today, in a world where natural disasters take the lives of men, women, and children... where terrorists seek to strike fear in the hearts of the innocent... where almost everyone is confronted by sorrow, grief, and pain in one way or another, people are searching for hope and they are searching for someone who cares.

Philip Yancey says, "The New Testament wants us to believe that the answer lies in you and in me... the ordinary people who make up the church. The Church was born that the Holy Spirit might work through you and me to reach out to a world in need, and to point to the one who conquered sin and death. The apostle Paul calls the church 'the body of Christ' with Jesus as the head. The way he saw it, a new species of humanity was emerging on earth, in whom God himself—the Holy Spirit—was living. The Church: you and me are the hands of God on earth. So that our Goodness becomes God's goodness... our suffering becomes 'the fellowship of sharing in his suffering.' Our actions become his actions... What happens to us, happens to him. The two worlds, seen and unseen, merge in Christ; and we... are quite literally 'in Christ.' From below, we tend to think of miracles as an invasion, a breaking into the natural world with spectacular force, and we long for such signs. But from above, from God's point of view, the real miracle... is that human bodies can become vessels filled with Spirit, that ordinary human acts of charity and goodness can become nothing less than the incarnation of God on earth.

A little boy wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six pack of coke and started his journey. When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park

just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his coke when he noticed that the old woman looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a coke. Again, she smiled at him, and the boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon, sharing a meal of Twinkies and Coke, but they never said a word. As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old woman, and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever. When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, “What did you do today that made you so happy?” He replied, “I had lunch with God.” But, before his mother could respond, he added, “You know what? She’s got the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen.” Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and asked, “Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?” She replied, “I ate Twinkies in the park with God.” But, before her son responded, she added, “You know, he’s much younger than I expected.”

So is God silent? That depends. Is the Church silent? In a world of suffering and pain... in a world where people are lonely, lost, and broken... in a world where people are searching for someone who will listen to them, hold them, and care for them, are you silent? Am I silent?

The Church: you and me led by the Holy Spirit is who Christ has called to break through the silence.

Steve Phillips
Westminster Presbyterian Church
April 11, 2010