

## **John 20: 19 -23**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Lynn Vahle**

**April 22, 2007**

As students in Norris Hall began to understand that those were gunshots they were hearing in a couple of classrooms they moved furniture against the door to keep the gunman out. And as the news media has reported the doors to the outside were chained shut so students couldn't get out of the building. They were locked in the building and that made their escape impossible, but a few were locked inside the classrooms and that saved their lives.

Totally by coincidence the text chosen for this Sunday tells us about the disciples huddled behind locked doors in fear for their lives. And I suppose our tendency is to say it isn't like what happened at Virginia Tech at all. But perhaps that is because we have heard the biblical story so often that we have domesticated it. It is evening on the first day of the week. Only a little over 50 hours ago the disciples had watched in shocked disbelief as the Roman government put Jesus to death on a cross. In a matter of hours they had arrested him on trumped up charges, held a kangaroo court, and sentenced him to death. All of that was bad enough, but this very morning some women who went to the gravesite discovered that his body was no longer where it had been buried. The disciples knew that the religious authorities were in collaboration with this ruthless government and it was hard to guess what they might take it into their minds to do next. And they certainly knew that murder was a distinct possibility for anyone who claimed to be a follower of the rabbi from Galilee. They knew that they could very easily be the next targets.

As they huddle together they are confused and frightened. They don't really know what is going on on the other side of the door which is their protection for the moment. They don't know what they should do. In their wildest dreams they never thought that the journey to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover with Jesus could end this way. They wanted to go home but they were being held prisoner by their own fear. They wanted to get as far from Jerusalem as they could but they were afraid to open the door. They had no strategy that would save them and so they are compelled to wait and worry. With every step that echoes down the road fear makes a new assault. From time to time panic breaks out behind the locked doors. They try to comfort one another but the words fall in a shallow pile on the floor. They pray but their prayers could not save Jesus.

Then suddenly Jesus is there with them. No crash of lightening, no peal of thunder, no shaking of the room. John just says he came and stood among them. They were so used to having him there when they were together that I have a feeling it was like old times and it caused a double take or two before they realized that he shouldn't be there, that he had died. And then I'm sure it took a bit of time for the reality to sink in. The women were right! They were afraid before, but now they are face to face with a ghost. I suspect their apprehension reached new highs.

But Jesus knows these people so well! And the first words he says to them are "Peace be with you". Put your fears to rest. Relax. You have no reason for anxiety. He shows them his hands and feet to assure them that he is not a ghost and that he is the man they saw crucified. Only then does John tell us that they 'saw' the Lord. Maybe that's when they recognized him. Maybe that's when they let themselves believe that it was really him. Maybe that's when they had their eyes opened to see who he truly was.

Whatever John means it was a cause for celebration.

Our journey of faith sometimes finds us shut up behind the closed and locked doors of fear as well. Sometimes it is the fear of death that a medical diagnosis or an accident brings. Sometimes it is the fear of having to stand up for what we believe when the authorities we oppose are formidable. Sometimes it is the fear of losing someone or something that holds the value of life for us. Sometimes it is the fear of having to admit our mistakes, our errors of judgment, our sin. Sometimes it is the fear of life changing before we are ready to accept it. Sometimes it is the fear of being inadequate or inferior. Whatever it is we all battle with fear. And fear has the ability to keep us locked up, afraid to open the door and move forward.

But from these disciples we can certainly learn that the risen Christ will not leave us alone with our fear. He comes to stand beside us. We may not see him, we may not be aware he has come into the situation, there may be nothing to alert our senses to his presence. But he is there. And his message for us is “Peace be with you”. Jesus doesn’t come to stop all conflict in the world, but he does come to bring peace even in the midst of conflict. He comes to bring peace when our only emotion is fear.

I have no doubt that he stood among the students of Virginia Tech on Monday morning and offered them peace in the midst of their fear and in the midst of their dying. I have no doubt that he stands with the devastated families in their emotional turmoil and offers peace that the world cannot give them. I have no doubt that he stands among all of us as we try to cope with yet another senseless act of terror and offers us peace.

But the peace he offers us is not a pat on the head and the assurance that everything will be okay. The peace he offers us is the same peace he offered the disciples as he continued to talk with them. No doubt there was

a pause between vs. 20 and 21. A time when they could assure themselves that it really was Jesus. A time of laughter and tears. A time of hugs and conversation. And then he says to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you”. He sends them out to be agents of peace in a world that was then, as now, filled with injustice and violence. He throws open the doors and pushes them out into the very conditions that they fear.

And to combat their fear he gives them the breath of God, God’s own spirit. He creates them with a new spirit. In Genesis it says that God breathed into Adam’s nostrils and he became a living soul. Here Jesus breathes on the disciples and they begin to live by the breath of God . And it isn’t something mysterious, it is the power of forgiveness. I can’t imagine that the disciples were never afraid again. I imagine that they were often frightened. But when they were frightened they had only to take a deep breath to remind themselves of the spirit of God within that would empower them to be agents of peace.

As we talked about this text in staff meeting we were trying to come up with a way to talk about forgiveness that would get beyond the stereotype that stops our thinking. Forgiveness far too often means one person saying “I’m sorry” and the second person saying something like, “Oh, its okay. I know you didn’t mean any harm”. But when Jesus calls us to live in peace and to proclaim peace to our world it has to go beyond that. In that conversation we came up with an image that held some potential. And then the next day I heard the same image used by a professor from Virginia Tech during an interview. Violence, terror, selfishness, abuse, greed, lying - these and many more actions tear holes in the fabric of our shared human life. At times they even shred the fabric of life. To live in peace is to mend the holes

in that fabric. To overcome evil with good. To believe even in the face of death that there is resurrection.

The fabric of life has had large holes blown in it again this week. In Blacksburg Virginia, in Houston Texas, in Baghdad, in families, in friendships. We are disciples. We breathe the spirit of God. And by our baptism we are called to recognize Christ standing among us giving us the power to repair the holes in the fabric of life.

Let us pray.