

As the Father Sent Me, I Send You
John 20:19-23

The disciples weren't feeling any joy as the sun set on that first Easter Day. Instead, they were filled with fear: fear of the crowds that had crucified Jesus, and fear of the religious leaders that plotted His death. In their confusion and their grief, they huddled together, perhaps choosing to meet in that upper room so that no one passing by could look in on them.

But why were they so afraid? Didn't Jesus predict everything that had happened to Him? "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: and they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him." Yes, it all happened just as Jesus had said it would. But Jesus had also predicted something else: "and the third day he shall rise again."

So, why didn't the disciples believe the rest of what Jesus had said? Why didn't they believe in the resurrection? There was, after all, at least some evidence that it was true. Early that morning, Peter and John had gone to the tomb and found it empty. And then Mary Magdalene had come to tell them that she had actually seen the risen Lord.

So why did they cower in that upper room? Why were they afraid? Because they had no faith. What they had seen with their eyes outweighed Jesus' words: they had seen the angry crowd, hurling abuse at their teacher, who had strangely made no reply. Yes, they knew what Mary had said to them about the empty tomb, but they had also heard the sound of the hammer on the nails piercing the hands that had healed so many others, hands that had either become strangely powerless, or somehow unwilling to extricate Jesus from the cross. On that first Easter evening, the disciples were living by sight and walking by fear, not faith. It's no wonder that they huddled behind closed doors as the shadows fell.

I wonder if we don't sometimes find ourselves doing the same thing, living by sight and fear instead of by faith. We know Christ's promises to be with us. We know His love has been so clearly displayed on the cross. Why, then, do we let what we see around us discourage us?

Perhaps it's simply because the world around us is so immediate, so discouraging, and often so disappointing. Who can ignore the relational chaos that rocks so many of our families? Who can simply dismiss the pain of chronic sickness when it robs you of sleep? Who can cast aside the despair of loneliness when that chair at the table is still empty? Oh no. The disciples were doing the logical thing, the commonsensical thing. They were acting on their own experience. That's why they were living behind the closed doors of fear, drawing into their shell away from the frightening reality all around them.

How do we break out of this shell? How can we overcome our fears, living as we do in the face of an often depressing reality?

Well, what changed the disciples' outlook? Jesus simply came in and stood in their midst. He said very little: "Peace be with you" was a common greeting of the day. No, it was not what Jesus said that was so important. It was simply His being there that made them glad.

Most strangely of all, it was precisely when He showed His wounds to the disciples that gladness drove all fear away from their minds. Instead of reminding them of the horror that was the crucifixion, the wounds of Christ confirmed for them Who He is, and what He had done for them.

And it is the wounds of Christ that still bring peace to us today. It is because we see the wounds of Christ that we know that He has truly died. And because He has died, we know that all those who trust in Him have been forgiven of our sins. It is the wounds of Christ that prove that we need not fear the judgment of God any more.

But seeing Jesus' physical wounds also proved another point to the disciples – that Jesus's body had risen from the dead. Jesus wasn't just a disembodied spirit. He wasn't a ghost. His crucified body had left His tomb and was standing before them.

Why is that so important? The fact that Jesus walked out of that tomb proves to us the truth of all the Scriptures which predicted His death and resurrection. Christ's bodily resurrection is the incontrovertible fact that is the foundation of our faith: because He lives, we believe His words. Because He lives, we know that all the rest of the words of the Bible are true.

But when they saw His wounds, the disciples were also filled with gladness because they knew that their friend and teacher was alive once again. His presence, His life simply overcame their grief. In the same way, those in Christ no longer need to fear sickness or death for ourselves or anyone else. Jesus' resurrection proves that He has gained the victory over sin and death once and for all. Because He lives, we need not fear.

How then do we combat fear in our lives? In spite of our discouragement, I suppose we could try to muster up faith within ourselves. We could try to give ourselves pep talks, encouraging one another to be brave.

Or we can simply do what the disciples did. We can look to Jesus and remember that He is risen. We can look to Jesus and remember that He has already conquered all our worst enemies. And the more we fill our minds with the reality of our resurrected Lord, the more our fear will depart and our hearts will be filled with gladness. That's what happened to those disciples who had huddled in fear behind the locked doors of the upper room. As the reality of Christ's death and resurrection fills all our horizons, the doors of our souls will be flung wide open, leaving no more room for fear.

But once the reality of the resurrection has flooded our being, once Christ has opened the doors of our hearts and allowed us to trust Him, we should not be content with simply looking out. No, doors are designed to be walked through. Just so, immediately after dispelling His disciples'

fears, Jesus sent them out: “Peace *be* unto you: as *my* Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” In the same way, we must not remain in our cocoon, safe in our comfort zone. Instead, just as He sent out the disciples, Jesus also sends us out, into our admittedly scary world.

But what is Jesus sending us to do? In a sense, the same thing that He did. When we look at the wounds of Jesus, we remember that he suffered for us. When we look at the wounds of Jesus, we thus remember that suffering and persecution are inevitable parts of being a follower of Christ. After all, in chapter 15 verse 20, John also records Jesus as saying, “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”

And so, just as the Father sent Jesus into the world to suffer through self-sacrifice, so the Father sends us into the world to do the same thing. That is, after all, the way we follow Jesus, by denying ourselves and take up our own crosses.

But why? If Jesus has suffered in our place, why should we have to suffer too? Why does the Father have to send us in the same way He sent Jesus?

The most obvious reason is that loving other people always involves some sort of suffering, some sort of self-sacrifice. If you spend money on someone else, you don't have it to spend on yourself. If you take time out to visit someone, that's time you don't get to spend on yourself. If you give of yourself in a relationship, there is no guarantee that you will be loved in return. Taking up our cross, following Jesus means heading out of our comfort zones, and out of ourselves – boldly risking everything in the service of others.

And there's a particular sort of risk all Christians are called to take today. For in order for the good news about Jesus to make sense, in order for people to know that they need to be saved, the Church must be able to speak about sin.

And in the modern world, that includes explaining exactly what sin is. For the fact is that many people these days simply don't believe in sin. Instead, they live by the code of the

hedonist: If it feels good, do it. The fact is that we can no longer count on the surrounding culture to reinforce the basics of Christian morality and ethics. We simply cannot assume that everyone knows what's right and what's wrong.

And so, in order to fulfill the mission to which Christ sends us, the church must call sin what it is. That seems to be the idea that lies behind verse 23. For if the church does not retain the sins of people but instead minimizes or dismisses them, then those people will die in their sins. Unless the church urges sinners to repent, they won't know that they need a savior at all. And that proclamation may cause us some suffering. It may bring us some wounds as well.

But it is precisely in the process of giving ourselves away that we most clearly proclaim the good news. For it is the risks we take, the selfless deeds that we do in the name of Christ that most clearly demonstrate and illustrate the love of God and the sacrifice of Christ. As we live the selfless life of Christ and as we show His love to others, they will not only be able to understand what we say about Jesus – they'll be able to see Jesus with their own eyes.

Now, I don't know about you, but this sort of risk-taking, this sort of selfless love is not easy for me. My natural tendency most of the time is to think of my own needs first, and then give other people the leftovers. So how can any of us love in the way Jesus loved? How can we really go as Jesus was sent? Even if we are no longer afraid, how can we truly show Christ to the world?

The good news is that where Jesus sends, He equips. Look at verse 22: "And when he had said this, he breathed on *them*, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." We cannot accomplish the mission of Christ in our own strength. Instead, it is the power of the Holy Spirit that overcomes our weakness, because He is none other than the Spirit of Christ. We cannot conquer our fears within ourselves. We cannot muster up selfless love for others within ourselves. Instead, it is the Holy Spirit of Christ who fills us with the love of Christ – a love for God that inevitably spills over into all our human relationships. It is the Holy Spirit Who thus

enables us to move out of our comfort zones, to walk out the doors into the streets with the good news in word and deed that all who trust in Christ will be saved from their sins.

What a wonderful task the Lord has given us – the privilege of participating in His plan of salvation for the world. Jesus has equipped His church with power to proclaim the truth for the conviction of sin and the salvation of sinners. So why should we let ourselves be discouraged by the circumstances of our lives? Why should we be afraid to proclaim the good news? We serve a risen Lord and a conquering King, Whose Spirit is within us! What a story we have to tell. What a love we have to show. And so in the name and the power of Christ, let us go as we are sent.