

When They Saw the Lord  
John 20:19-23

What a strange Easter morning this is, and not just because of the lousy weather. No new suits or dresses for the kids, and no egg hunt in the church yard. No big crowd for worship – at least not in person. Instead of getting together for the biggest festival of the Christian year, we're all staying home.

And that's the same thing that Jesus' disciples did on that first Easter morning. Oh, make no mistake. Mary Magdalene did get to experience all the gladness we've read and sung about and experienced so many times before. Early that morning she had already gazed into the face of her risen Lord, holding Him close to her in joyful amazement. And two times she had run to tell the rest of Jesus' followers, first about the empty tomb, and then that she had seen the risen Christ.

But after Peter and John went to check out her strange story, they just shrugged and went back home. And as that first Easter Sunday drew to a close, they were doing pretty much what we've done all week long, staying behind closed doors, afraid to go out. Oh, sure, they had different fears. They thought they would be arrested by the Roman soldiers or the religious leaders while we're apprehensive about a contagious virus. But they felt the same sort of longing for good times in the past, the same vague sense of dread in the present and more than a little fear of the future.

But why were they so afraid? After all, Jesus had predicted everything that ended up happening to Him. What had He told them? "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." And 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, since Jesus had proved He could see into the future, why didn't the disciples believe what Jesus had said about His resurrection? Mary had told them it was true, and Peter and John had seen the empty tomb for themselves. So why did they go on cowering in that upper room? Why were they so afraid?

For the same reason that so many of us are: they allowed their personal experience, what they could see and hear and feel, to trump Jesus' words. After all, they had seen the angry crowd, hurling abuse at their teacher, who had strangely made no reply. They had heard the sound of the hammer on the nails piercing the hands that had healed so many others, hands that had seemed to become strangely powerless. On that first Easter evening, the disciples were living by sight and walking by fear, not faith. So, 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. After all, we know Christ's promises to be with us. We've seen His love displayed on the cross and His power displayed at the empty tomb. Why, then, have we allowed the circumstances of our lives to make us afraid?

Perhaps it's simply because what we can see and hear and feel is so discouraging, and often so disappointing. Who can ignore the steady drumbeat of bad news, from ever-rising unemployment rates to increasing death tolls from an invisible enemy? 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? Who can just wish away the urgent cravings of addiction? 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.

So, how do we break out of the same sort of shell? How can we overcome our fears, living as we are in the face of a scary and all-too-often depressing reality?

Well, what was it that 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 those same wounds can still bring peace to us today. After all, the wounds of Christ prove that He truly suffered and 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 proclaim we need not fear the judgment of God any more.

But seeing the wounds of Christ also proved something else 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 walked out of that tomb and was standing before them, scars and all.

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 forms 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 seeing the wounds on the Body of Christ gave His disciples yet another reason for gladness: their friend and teacher was alive and with them 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 for anyone else. Jesus' resurrection proves that He has gained full and final victory over sin and death once and for all.

Yes, because we've seen His wounds, we need not fear God's judgment. Because His scarred body walked out of that tomb, we know that everything He says is true. Because He lives, we can rejoice in the hope of the resurrection.

How then do we handle the very reasonable fears we have, fears based in the all-too-real world around us? Well, 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.

The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. That's the best news we could ever hope to hear.

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 in 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 holy huddle, safe in our Christian cocoon. Instead, just as He sent out the disciples, Jesus also sends us out, into our admittedly scary world.

But what exactly 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 only way we can 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 turn your focus to the needs of others, you run the risk of your own needs not being met. If you spend money on someone else, you don't have it to spend on yourself. If you take time out to call someone or pay a visit, 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 always means heading out of our comfort zones, and out of ourselves – boldly risking everything in the service of others.

And make no mistake, following Jesus always involves risk, even for us American Christians. No, we may not have to worry about ISIS thugs beheading us because of our faith. But 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 not only demonstrate the love of Christ through our works of charity and mercy. We must run the risk of speaking His loving words about sin.

And that's one thing the modern world just doesn't want to hear. No, all too many people live today by the code of the hedonist: If it feels good, do it. And an increasing number of people reject the very idea that there can be any absolute truth at all, insisting instead that they can create their own truth. So, they certainly don't want to believe that God has the right to determine for them what's right and wrong – they want to be in complete control of their own bodies, their own minds, their own lives.

But in order to make any sense out of the cross, in order to fulfill the mission to which Christ calls us and 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, if the church does not insist that certain thoughts, words and deeds are in fact contrary to God's will, if the Church minimizes or dismisses the seriousness of the world's rebellion against God, many people will in fact die in their sins. Unless the church explains the danger of sin is and urges sinners to repent, they won't know that they need a Savior at all.

Now, this is not to say that we have to be a bunch of holier-than-thou jerks – we are always called to speak the truth in love. But however gently we may put it, however honest we may be about our own struggles and failings, however we may urge people to receive God's gracious pardon, the fact of the cross, the fact of the wounds of Christ proves that we can't deny the reality of God's judgment for sin. And that's one thing this world doesn't want to hear.

So what if we were to take a firm stand for what the Bible says is right and wrong? What if we were to uphold the sanctity of human life in the face of our fellow citizens who have collectively killed 60 million of our countrymen before they had a chance to be born? What if we were to insist that God's plan for marriage – one man and one woman for a lifetime – really is best both for the couple and for their children? What if we were to be honest with our friends about the moral and physical dangers of alcohol and drug use? Proclaiming the truth about sin may cost us some of those friends. It may turn people away from our businesses. Retaining the sins of the world may cause us some pain. It may bring us some wounds. It's risky.

Now, I don't know about you, but this sort of risk-taking is not easy for me. And just knowing the fact that Jesus walked out of that tomb on Easter morning doesn't make all my fear of such risk magically disappear. So how can we experience the transforming power of His Resurrection? How can we truly love one another in the way Jesus loved us? How can we really go in the same way that Jesus was sent?

Look at verse 22: "And when he had said this, he breathed on *them*, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." That's the good news: where Jesus sends, He equips. He doesn't expect us to carry out His mission in our own strength. For He doesn't just come to us and show us His wounds – He fills us with His Spirit, with Himself.

Look, Jesus' disciples lived with Him for three years. They heard every word that He said, and they even did miracles in His name. And they saw the scars on His resurrected body with their own eyes. But they still needed the power of the Holy Spirit in order to accomplish the mission which He set before them.

And the same thing is true for us. Y'all, Jesus doesn't just show us His wounds to prove an intellectual point to us. He gives us the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome our fears. Jesus doesn't expect us to love and serve others just because it's the right thing to do – no, it is the Holy Spirit who fills us with the selfless love of Christ Himself – a love for God that inevitably spills over into all our human relationships. And in the same way, it is the Holy Spirit Who will enable us to move out of our comfort zones, to walk out the doors into the streets with good news to share in word and deed, the good news that Christ died and rose again to save all who trust in Him from the very real problem of our very real rebellion against a very real God.

So, even if we have to stay at home for awhile, there's no reason we can't rejoice in this good news, and there's no reason we can't share it however we can. Yes, sin is real, and sin is serious enough that Jesus had to die, receiving the judgment that we all deserve. But if His wounds are real, His tomb is also empty. So today, we can be free from the fear of death, free to love and serve others, because the risen Christ is living within all who trust Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord. The Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Let's believe and share this good news!