

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3rd Sunday of Easter
Year B

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April 19, 2015

Text: John 20:19-31

Title: “A Place to Call Home: All Are Welcome!”

The scriptures of the Easter season speak time and again about the family of God, of loving one another as brothers and sisters, children of God. Several times, the word “abide” invites us to reside, to dwell in the presence of the Risen One. On Easter, a messenger tells the disciples to meet the risen Jesus back at Galilee, the place they began together and the place where they lived and worked together during his ministry. Following the resurrection, the book of Acts describes the early church as people who shared everything so that anyone who had a need was cared for. Therefore, in this Easter season, the time between Easter and Pentecost in the church, we will be exploring what it means to have “a place to call home” in our spiritual lives.

This morning you may have noticed welcome mats as you came to worship. We use them in our homes. Businesses use them to invite customers. While welcome mats might be nice, they really don't do the job of creating an atmosphere of welcome all by themselves. The sign might say “Welcome” but if no one speaks to you when you come in the door, we know the sign doesn't mean anything.

I walked into a store the other day to pick up an online order I'd placed, stood at the counter waiting. The manager and another worker were talking together behind the service desk. Both of them so focused on what they were doing and talking to one another that I just stood there waiting and waiting. Both were aware I was waiting but neither said a word or looked my way to let me know someone would be with me in a moment. No communication at all. So I waited. After what seemed a reasonable period of time to expect some kind of communication from them, I left and went to a register and asked the clerk for some help. He gladly complied and went back to the service desk to ask the manager to cover the register for him so he could look for my order. The manager gave both of us a scowl. It wasn't a very welcoming expression.

We know when we are welcome and when we aren't just by the behavior of the people we are with--by their words, their actions. When it comes to the faith community the same is true. You know when you walk in if it's a welcoming place, if the people are truly open to receiving you or are content to stay to their own friends and family. What does it mean to be a welcoming place when it comes to a spiritual home? Does it matter?

The scenes we hear described in John's Gospel this morning are anything but welcoming. The doors were locked. The disciples were hunkered down in fear that perhaps they'd be next to hang from a cross. Not much interest in letting anyone else into their community because they were focused on self-preservation and when a group of people are focused on self-preservation, it's hard to see beyond themselves, hard to unlock the door and let someone else in because fear keeps them confined.

Yet into this cloistered, fearful group Jesus appears. And the first thing he says to them—I love this!—the first thing he says to them is “Peace be with you!” In the midst of fear Jesus brings his peace, God's peace.

I wonder if any of us would respond likewise to a group of people who ran away when the going got tough and left Jesus alone to face the trials he faced all by himself. Every one of them—his closest companions—every one of them abandoned him. One of his closest, Peter, went further and blatantly lied about knowing Jesus, not just once but three times. Can you imagine facing the most frightening trial of your entire life and your family and friends completely abandoning you, leaving you alone to endure it on your own?

That's what happened to Jesus, and the first thing he says to his abandoning friends is "Peace be with you!" Even to the denying Peter, Jesus offers his peace. Peace in the midst of fear, peace in the face of betrayal, denial and abandonment: that's the power of God's grace in Jesus. I imagine Peter expecting a tongue lashing or at least a question: "Peter, why?" But that's not Jesus' approach: "Peace be with you." Talk about the power of the Word! I suspect that Jesus already knew that the fear they experienced was punishment enough.

When I was in upper elementary school, we had a snowmobile. All our friends families were getting them and my brother, sister and I begged our parents to get one. So Dad managed to buy a used Ski Daddler snowmobile. The hood looked like half of an upside down bathtub, but we didn't care. It had a motor, a track and skis and it ran, so we could run the fields with our friends, which we did.

We had that old snowmobile for a couple of years, and Dad decided to upgrade to a new Polaris. He has always been a do-it-yourselfer, good with tools, and so he fixed it up: painted the whole thing even the chassis and went to a Polaris dealer and made a deal.

The day he was taking the machine to make the trade, I asked if I could take it out for one last spin. He said, "Sure." So out I went, put on my suit and required helmet, out on that old Ski Daddler, took a trip through the field next to our house, came back home and started doing donuts on the ice on the lot between our house and the neighbors'. In the execution of one of those donuts I hit a patch of ground peeking through the ice. I shot off the ice like a rocket and headed straight for the camping trailer parked nearby. SMASH! That newly repaired and painted hood didn't look so good.

Of course, I knew what I'd done, how hard my father had worked to get this thing ready. I ran into the house very upset, expecting some kind of punishment. Told my father what I'd done. He asked if I was alright, then went outside, took a look at the hood, then made a phone call to the dealer telling him he wouldn't be bringing the machine in to trade that day. Could he have a couple of more days to make the repair? He and I spent the next few days in the garage repairing the damage I'd caused, but my father never chastised me, didn't intensify my fear by piling on his own anger. I could tell he really wasn't happy and although the offense was not nearly as grave as the kind of abandonment or denial Jesus experienced, there was grace in how he handled my fear and regret. He already knew that my fear and expressed regret was punishment enough. He didn't have to chastise me because I'd already done a pretty good job of it myself.

So the disciples receive this message of peace from Jesus as they huddled in their locked house and Jesus goes one step further in easing their fears. He tells them again "Peace be with you!" maybe because he thought once wasn't enough to smash the grip of fear which can so control our lives. He said, "As the Father has sent me so I am sending you." And then, like God did with the first human being in the second chapter of Genesis to give life, Jesus breathed on them in order to give them the Holy Spirit. It's what some scholars have called the Johannine Pentecost. The message here is that this doesn't end here behind closed doors huddling in fear. God's power trumps fear, so that the doors of this community are to be flung open so others may be welcomed in. Jesus sends them out beyond their fears.

But Thomas missed all of this. Thomas must have been out getting the groceries or something because it's clear he wasn't there, and when the others inform him that they had seen Jesus, Thomas isn't buying it. "Unless I see... Unless I touch, I will not believe."

Thomas has taken a bad rap through the centuries. "Doubting Thomas" he's been referred to, as the self-righteous part of us wags a finger at him as if to say "Shame on you, Thomas!" Yet Thomas is the guy who isn't afraid to ask questions others might like to ask but are too afraid to do so. Thomas is

the one we want in the room to ask the questions many people have but can't quite get the courage up to ask them. He's the person who isn't going to take someone else's word for it. If it's going to impact his life, he has to know for himself that it's true. Although he's heard others' experiences of Jesus, unless he has an encounter of his own that convinces him Jesus is alive, he is just not buying it because when the dead are buried that's the end of it. Life is over as far as he could tell. To convince him otherwise is going to take some doing.

So once again, a week later, this group—now including Thomas—is still behind locked doors. And once again, Jesus appears. The first thing he says is ... “Peace be with you!” In spite of hearing this from Jesus twice, Jesus repeats the message, maybe because they are all still gripped by their fears as they keep the doors locked. And maybe it's also indicative of the fact that we need to hear those words over and over again, too, because our fears are often renewed over and over again. We too can be gripped by one kind of fear or another, and we need Jesus' reminder, “Peace be with you!”, repeatedly, too.

Jesus turns his attention to Thomas and invites him to see and touch in order to believe.

If you were here on Easter Sunday you may remember that the word for *belief* in Greek is *pisteau* and that *pisteau* can also be translated as *trust*. I've heard a couple of you tell me the image I shared in a story of getting in the wheelbarrow stuck with you as an image that helped make the distinction between what it means to believe and what it means to trust. Jesus here is inviting Thomas to see and to touch in order to trust him. He is inviting Thomas to get in his wheelbarrow. And that's all it takes for Thomas. He doesn't follow up on his need to examine or touch wounds. Seeing Jesus is enough for him.

What I hear in this post-resurrection experience of the disciples is that even people of faith experience fear and doubt. Even people of faith need to hear over and over again that God brings peace to our fears and our doubts. And communities of faith--places we consider our spiritual home--include doubters and deniers and maybe even betrayers, but Christ comes in spite of all of them and says “Peace be with you!” Even a Christ-persecutor like the apostle Paul encountered the risen Christ, and it changed his life. It changed the world!

If people like that can come to trust in the grace and peace of Christ, what about you? What about me? Can you come to trust Christ enough to unlock the doors of your fears and welcome others in? Can you allow Christ to give you the kind of peace that overcomes your fear and send you to a new person next door or in the next pew to authentically welcome them into your life?

This afternoon I leave for Chicago again for another 3-day session learning about family emotional processes. One of the key learnings from this experience has been that all of us carry around fears we inherit from our families. We don't ask for them, but they are a part of who we are as human beings. Some of us have more traumatic experiences in our families' experiences than others, but all of us have anxieties we carry as a result of the experiences of those who've gone before. Maybe part of Jesus' reaction to the disciples' fear by offering his peace is a recognition that the fears we carry are punishment enough, and just maybe we can be freer to experience Christ's peace when we recognize that all of us have fears that need the peace of Christ. Maybe we can come to a place that, by recognizing that the other person with whom we might be struggling has his or her own fears to deal with, we might ourselves be able to welcome them as Jesus welcomed his disciples by saying “Peace be with you” even to those who abandoned him. When we are able to do that and be that for one another—different as we are—then we've found a place to call home. Then, we've come to a place in which we are deeply and authentically welcomed. May that be true here in this congregation as we continue to call this place our spiritual home.