

“The Society We Can Co-Create: No More Violence”

John 20: 19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Here’s a bit of important bible trivia. Regarding Noah’s Arc: what is the ultimate reason God regrets making people and decides to flood the earth? Normally we blame some form of human wickedness. But our story specifically says, “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and full of violence.” Corruption and violence spawning out of control, until finally God hits the reset button. And after forty days and nights of torrential downpours, a dove comes back with an olive branch—both symbols of peace. The rainbow is nice too! Clearly we are seeing what God has desired for us and our world and where things went wrong.

So start by admitting: it has taken us humans a bit longer than expected to achieve God’s desire for us. We might wonder how much has changed. Corruption and violence. The two are paired together like biscuits and gravy. Every week it seems there is another mass shooting somewhere. Follow the violence and find corrupt politicians. Did you hear that North Carolina legislature, loosened gun laws so now anyone can acquire a handgun without a permit or background check? Ironically, the bill landed a few hours after another school shooting. Corruption needs violence, and violence needs corruption. We live in a world where there answer to bad guys with guns is teachers with guns—more guns!? We live in a world where if someone shoots down one of ours, we take down two of theirs. Where rivalry and retaliation and retribution are knee jerk reactions until the violence has spawned out of control. Corruption and violence. Violence and corruption. The two go hand in hand.

Which is why Jesus’ first resurrection words to the disciples are: “Peace be with you!” The you is plural: “Peace be with y’all!” It’s interesting. Here is someone who was just brutally executed by the state. Judged in an unfair trial. Abandoned by his closest friends. Scapegoated by the

religious system to preserve the status quo. And his first words are “peace.” The new community which Jesus is breathing into life, responds to violence with peace.

Then Jesus does something remarkable. He shows them his wounds. I mean, who does that? Who lets others into the hurts they’ve experienced? Whose response to corruption is to show the wounds the injustice has created? Isn’t our natural impulse to lock the doors and hide out until the dust settles? But it turns out, resurrection still finds its way inside the walls and closets we build to protect ourselves. And it finds us. “Peace be with you. Peace be with you. Peace!”

But there is another resurrection word Jesus pairs with *shalom*. As he breathes the Holy Spirit into them he says, “Forgive.” Peace and forgiveness is the pairing resurrection is founded upon. Neither one is particularly easy to achieve, we know. But notice in the new society Jesus is breathing to life, there is no room for violence against others, or for the violence we inflict upon ourselves by holding onto our wounds. Someone once said that forgiveness is accepting that the past cannot be any different. Jesus showing his wounds says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” The question is where are sins of others retained? In us, of course! The hurts or wrongs we’ve experienced, the anger, the resentment, it all gets walled in or it sneaks out...it continues the cycle. It is retained. The word Jesus pairs with peace is forgiveness.

Well, both are nearly impossible sometimes, aren’t they? Forgiving others who have wronged us. Forgiving ourselves for a past we cannot change. Jesus knows peace and forgiveness are not easy, which is why he breathes his Spirit into his disciples. Notice Pentecost comes on resurrection day for John’s gospel. Because resurrection can’t germinate in the soil of resentment. Only someone who breathes the Spirit of peace and forgiveness into the world has any chance of changing it. There are only four movements I can think of where a new society was formed through non-violent action. The Indian Independence Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. The Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. King and others. The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and the Resurrection Movement breathed into life by Jesus. All movements built upon peace and forgiveness. But the truth is, both are difficult to do. Which is why Jesus breathes his Spirit into us.

After the scene with Thomas and the touching of the wound—notice there is touching now whereas before Jesus told Mary not to touch him—it offers a tag line. It tells us that Jesus did many other things with his disciples which aren’t written down. It’s not written down, because each generation has experienced these signs of resurrection. The Moral Monday marches. Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. The Broad-Based organizing efforts in Winston Salem and beyond. The rising Spirit who breathes an idea into us to rally together trans folk and others to support each other and break the cycle of fear and violence by working toward transformation. Examples where the power of community is far greater than the power of violence.

There is a new society we are asked to breathe into life together. One where corruption and violence is exposed and dismantled by peace and forgiveness. As we follow Christ’s lead, I pray you find them both in our current world. More, I pray they sneak past the walls and find you. And through believing you will have life in his name. Amen.