

**“Easter Evening Hope”**  
**A sermon by Rev. Jim Tom**  
**Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church**  
**April 19, 2020 Second Sunday of Easter**  
**John 20: 10-31**

**Theme:**

It wasn't only that Jesus was raised from the dead in his resurrection; it was that he returned to the same followers who had betrayed and deserted him in his hour of need. He returns not to those who are good and righteous, but he is raised and returns to those who are cowardly, weak, and sinful betrayers—he returns to people like us. Therein is our great hope. Though we in a myriad of ways desert Jesus, he doesn't desert us.

**Introduction to the readings:**

*Acts 2:14a, 22-32*

Peter is asked to explain the miracle of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He cites the words of the prophets in testifying that this promise is to "as many as the Lord God invites."

*1 Peter 1:3-9*

The First Letter of Peter calls upon the church to rejoice even in its suffering because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*John 20:19-31*

The fearful disciples are gathered behind locked doors. The risen Christ appears to them and says, "Peace."

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus, you have called each of us to follow you, and we have. Each of us, in our own way, comes forth to walk with you and live for you.

Sometimes the way has been difficult. Though you warned us, somehow we're still surprised that the way of the Lord Christ is the way of cross. We find ourselves unprepared for the disappointments, the rejections, the opposition and temptation.

We confess that we haven't always followed you as we ought. When we should have been courageous, we have been cowardly. When you expected us to speak up and witness, we remained silent.

Forgive us, good Lord. In your grace, don't hold our sin against us. Keep appearing to us and returning to us so that we, having received forgiveness, might return to you. Amen.

**Encountering the text:**

Jesus miraculously passes through locked doors and appears before his frightened disciples. The first thing Jesus says to them is, "Peace." Shalom. He identifies himself and shows them his scars.

The disciples react with joy. (In John 16:20 Jesus told his disciples that they would have pain but that when he returned they would have joy.)

Then Jesus commissions them (20:21) and breathes upon them the Holy Spirit (20:22). On top of that, Jesus authorizes them to forgive sins (20:23). These are all rather amazing gifts and

empowerments to be bestowed on those who are found behind locked doors, shaking from fear. From here the story of Easter evening moves toward Thomas.

Once again it's a rich story from John's Gospel. We would do well to settle on some pregnant detail in the narrative. Here's one: Jesus' first says to his disciples, "Peace." They are fearful. Why? Jesus pronounces "peace." Why?

Can it be that these gathered, Jesus's closest friends and comrades, are also his most dramatic, sad betrayers? They fear the possibility that the Romans, who have so cruelly killed Jesus, now may be on the prowl after his followers. Yet they also have good reason to fear Jesus. What if the one who has been crucified, the one whom all of them betrayed and forsook in his hour of need, has now returned from the dead?

Surely it's painful for the disciples in the room to be shown the holes in the hands and feet of the risen Christ as bodily reminders of what he'd been through on the cross. It must have been painful because of their own complicity or at least acquiescence in the deeds wrought against Jesus.

On Easter we celebrate the resurrection. Now, on this Sunday after Easter, the Lectionary gives us the opportunity to reflect further on the meaning of resurrection. There's significance in the simple fact that the resurrected Jesus appears first to the very disciples who betrayed him. Regardless of what he says to them, it's a wonder that he went to them, breathed upon them, commissioned them, and gave them the same Holy Spirit that empowered him. All this Jesus did for them, the very ones who so disappointed him.

One might justly expect Jesus to rebuke them for their infidelity—instead he blesses them, graces them, sends them forth to do the same miraculous work that has characterized his ministry. Easter is about forgiveness.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commands forgiving our enemies. Little did we know that some of Jesus's most tragic enemies were his twelve best friends. These are the ones to whom he appears, upon whom he bestows his Holy Spirit, those whom he forgives.

From the cross Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them. . . ." Presumably he was speaking to those who actively crucified him—the soldiers, the howling mob, the priests and government officials. Now, on Easter evening, he enacts forgiveness among his own followers.

Easter is about the defeat of death and evil by God's miraculous power, the triumph of life and hope. Now, on Easter evening, the resurrection is also about a God who forgives and then commissions those who are forgiven.

### **Proclaiming the text:**

"Marriage is a promise," I instructed the young couple. The core of the Service of Marriage is the vows a couple makes to each other. It's my duty, as a pastor, to ask them, "Are you sure that you want to make unconditional, exclusive, lifelong vows of commitment to each other?"

She responded with an enthusiastic, "Yes!" He seemed hesitant, reserved. I asked him again, "Are you sure you want to make unconditional, exclusive vows?"

"I'm sure that's what I want to do, but I wish I could be more certain that's what I will do," he said, with a sad look on his face.

I loved his candor, his unflinching honesty.

"I look back over my life," he went on to explain, "and I see lots of good intentions, lots of sincerely made promises that I was unable to keep. I told the bank, 'I promise that if you will give

me a loan for college, I'll finish in four years and pay you back right away.' Didn't happen. I promised myself that I would work out at the gym every other day. That lasted a month. My own parents, two really great people, were unable to stay married in spite of the promises they made to God and everyone. They are really good folks. If they couldn't keep their vows, what hope do I have?"

Now, what would you have said to that young man in his doubts that he could be faithful to his vows?

*Well, this premarital counseling session is ended. You are obviously too unpredictable and quixotic to be married. The wedding is off.*

*Or, Don't be so hard on yourself Im sure you tried, and trying is all that's expected. Maybe you'll have better luck with fidelity the next time.*

*Or, Take a deep breath. Make a tight fist. Say ten times, "I will be more faithful. I won't disappoint myself ever again. I will try harder. "*

*Or, Look, something like half of all new marriages end in divorce today. When I ask you to make vows in the service, I'm not really serious. Nobody expects you to be perfect.*

Or, I could say, "Let me tell you an Easter story."

Easter? What difference does that make?

"I'll explain. Thursday and Friday didn't go that well for Jesus's twelve best friends, his disciples. On Thursday evening, around the table, they all took turns claiming that though everybody else might forsake him, in case things got ugly, they would all stand with him. Then, before the night was over, the soldiers came, Jesus was arrested, and they all fled into the dark. We wish that Judas was the sole betrayer. But no, by their cowardice and flight they all betrayed Jesus in his hour of need.

"On Friday, when Jesus was tried and beaten within an inch of his life, they only heard of it. None of them were close by. And when he was forced to drag his own cross up Calvary, none of them were there to help. And when they crucified and tortured him, only a couple of them stood by at the foot of his cross.

"You can imagine the mood of the disciples by Easter evening. True, a couple of them had gone to the tomb. It was empty. Somebody, in one last indignity, had stolen the body. The Romans, who had been on a bloody rampage that weekend, were probably looking for them so they might continue to purge the memory of Jesus—the one they had forsaken.

"So they huddled behind locked doors. Then, wonder of wonders, Jesus came and stood among them. They—when they thought of all the ways they had disappointed and forsaken him—huddled in terror.

"And the resurrected Christ said to them, 'Peace.' He gave them the same Spirit that moved him. He put them in charge of his continuing work. He who should have condemned and punished them returned to them.

"Before, when he taught them, he commanded them to forgive those who had trespassed against them. He told lots of stories, parables of forgiveness and grace. Constantly he forgave people, some before they asked for forgiveness. He even commanded them to forgive their enemies. Little did they know that they would be the enemies forgiven, his twelve best friends who were unable faithfully to be friends to him."

What difference does Easter make? Easter evening is a demonstration that the truth of the resurrection is not only that a dead, crucified, horribly mangled body was raised from the dead. The grand truth is that resurrected Jesus, in all of his glory, returned to us, His return to us became a bodily, miraculous demonstration of the depth of his forgiveness for us.

The Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus is able to "sympathize with our weaknesses . . . when we need help" (4:15-16 CEB). A major way he helps is by continuing to return to us, to forgive us so that we might begin again to follow him,

When you're baptized, you or your sponsors make promises, vows to be loyal to Jesus, to follow him wherever he leads you, to work for him, pray to him, and trust him. Very few of us keep those baptismal vows—not faithfully. For one thing, Jesus demands much of us. On Easter evening, he gave us his Spirit and told us to go out and forgive sin. He commissioned us to go into the whole world in his name and preach and enact the gospel. Who among us is worthy of such an assignment?

For another thing we are human, all too human. 'We are not angels. Not saints. No wonder we fail to keep the allegiance that we have promised to the reign of God.

What hope is there for us in our weakness and failing?

It's the hope of Easter evening, the hope that the same Christ who came even to those who forsook him in his greatest hour of need will not forsake us. He appears, returns. shows himself to us, breathes anew his Spirit into us, and assigns us his work to do.

There's no vow that you can break, no good intention that you can fail to carry out, that he cannot forgive. If he raised and returned and forgave his disciples, he can forgive anybody.

And when you know that God is a God of love and forgiveness—the same God who broke through those locked doors on Easter evening, saying, "Peace," returning to the same disciples who had turned away from him—you know this God enables you to make bold promises.

You are able to venture forth because you know that God wants you to do well, to keep your commitments, to honor your promises.

Christ doesn't expect any of us to do any of this alone. Therefore he breathes his Spirit upon us and gives us what we need to succeed at discipleship. Jesus stood among his betrayers and deniers that evening. Once he forgave them [or their betrayal and gifted them with his empowering Spirit, this same group of once losers and betrayers left that locked room and went on courageously to spread the gospel over the whole world.

That Easter evening could be said to be the birth of the church, the foundation for our gathering this morning. Who is the church? A bunch of people who make public promises to serve Jesus, to be part of his reign, to witness to him, and to work with him and then . . . stumble, fall away, backslide, deceive, and cowardly disappoint him and ourselves. That's the church.

And then he returns to us, he rises from whatever tomb we've used to seal him from us, he says, "Peace," he forgives us, breathes his Holy Spirit upon us, even us, and once again we are thereby able to pick ourselves up, take a deep breath, and follow him toward whatever Galilee he would take us to. That's the church. A bunch of disappointing sinners to whom Jesus has returned and forgiven.

So we can make our vows, assert our good intentions, launch forth in risky ventures for him knowing that even when we stumble, even when we get it wrong, he seems to have this relentless determination to make us right.

Thus Martin Luther could encourage the Christians of his day to "sin boldly." We are sinners. Sometimes, despite the good that we would do, we do wrong instead. But knowing that Jesus forgives, that he is determined to overcome any obstacle between us and his loving purposes for us, we can boldly make promises to him, live for him, speak up for him, in the expectation that we will be forgiven by him.

Our great hope, in life and in death, is that the same risen Christ who was known for immediately, unreservedly, forgivingly returning to his disobedient first disciples will continue to return to and forgive us. So we make our vows in confidence—not that we're the best possible representatives of Jesus in the world, but that we're the ones he has chosen. We know well that we're not the most courageous Christians possible, but we are the only ones here, now, and we are the ones he keeps forgiving and restoring to ministry.

Happy Easter. Jesus has returned to us, said, "Peace" to us, breathed upon us, and sent us forth. Us, even us.

### **Relating the text:**

In his very brief appearance at the tomb, the risen Christ tells the women at the tomb, "Don't be afraid," "go," and "tell" (Matt 28:10 CEB). Note that the words are very close to what Jesus says just before this Sunday's Gospel, in John 20:11-18. Appearance, forgiveness, and vocation are linked in both Matthew's and John's accounts of Easter.

in the context of our interpretation of John 20:1-10, it's as if the risen Christ says, "Don't be afraid. I forgive you for your betrayal and denial when the going got rough at the cross. Now go—go forth into all the world and tell someone that I am not only a God of righteousness, justice, and peace but also a God of forgiveness and embrace."

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Somewhere Stanley Hauerwas has said that one of the great functions of marriage is training in offering and receiving forgiveness. Any two people who promise always to love each other always to care, to be patient, to work for the good of each other, must be, of necessity, experts in the arts of receiving and giving forgiveness!

Perhaps that's one reason why the church got into the business of marrying people in the first place. Marriage gets a bum rap from St. Paul and not much mention from Jesus, who himself was not married.

Perhaps somebody in the church said, "Let's see if a couple of people can stand up before God and the church and make lifelong, exclusive, solemn vows to live together and love each other no matter what, and let's see how they handle their failures. Let's see if they can really believe that Jesus Christ saves sinners."

Marriage may be a sort of home correspondence course in discipleship.

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C. S. Lewis was once asked, "Why are so many of the atheists I know such wonderful, good people?"

Lewis replied, "They are forced to be."

When you don't believe in the existence of a God who forgives, then you are forced to be really, really good people. What a burden it is to be an atheist!"

When a presidential candidate bragged that he had never asked for forgiveness, that he had never had the need to apologize for anything he had done wrong, I thought it a public testimonial to the man's superficiality and self-deceit.

Then, upon further reflection, I thought it sad, It's sad to be a person who doesn't know a God whose property it is to have mercy, as the old prayer once put it. One must either be very, very righteous (I'm sure this man is not), or one must be extremely self-deceitful and full of denial (which I expect he is).