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Second Sunday in Easter

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(delivered by the Rev. Kristian Kohler)



“The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear”

In that line I am reminded of the times when I was child, and felt vulnerable. Sometimes when I had watched the news and heard about a crime that happened in our city; sometimes late at night when I heard sounds coming from downstairs. I shut my bedroom door, locked it, in fear.

What did the disciples fear when they locked the door? The text says they feared the Jews. Just to be clear: when John uses the phrase “the Jews” he’s referring not to the people – the disciples themselves are Jews – but to the religious authorities, to those in power. The disciples are hiding out because they think, given their association with Jesus, they are in trouble. They didn’t want to suffer. They had given their hearts and minds to following the Messiah; they wanted to become like him in as many ways as they could. And yet Jesus kept talking about suffering, kept talking about death as the way to life. They knew the way it ended for him and that’s when they jumped ship: they didn’t want his wounds to become their wounds.

We read this text on Creation Care Sunday, a Sunday where we try and illumine humanity’s relationship to the earth. It falls on this Sunday because it’s the week of Earth day, but I rather like that it falls on the Sunday where the disciples are in hiding, struggling to cope, behind a locked door. Imagine what this door represents. As I’ve thought about this text this week, I think the disciples are in the first stage of grief. We might call their locked door: Denial. They aren’t yet in a place where they can reckon with what has just happened. The natural way to keep yourself from taking in the suffering before you is to try and convince yourself it doesn’t exist. We know about this in humanity’s relationship to the reality of climate catastrophe.

What I want to suggest is that our culture’s closed door runs deeper than denying the science of climate change; most people at this point accept that we have something

of an emergency on our hands. The door of denial we are behind is more fundamental, more endemic to human nature; we can call it the denial of limits: that life and time and resources and energy and adventures are limited. As Americans we embrace potential and possibilities and new horizons; “you are who you choose to be” was the banner hanging in our high-school cafeteria. What’s difficult is recognizing that we can only do a handful of things really well in our lives with the finite set of choices that we have.

Think about this way. For centuries now we’ve been playing a game, which goes like this: how can humanity use those other constituent elements of this planet in its fundamental project of overcoming its limitations? Virtually everything – be it silicon, titanium, oil, or ivory – has been corralled into this project. And notice: virtually every strategy for addressing climate change has been about working out how we can find renewable resources with which to continue this project. And the church is invited to question this denial of limits. “It’s okay to be human [we say]; its okay not to be able to achieve everything in life; to own everything, visit everywhere, sit on every board. Take a breath, enjoy who you are..”

Well, at this point, we give thanks that our Lord does not leave us alone behind the doors of denial. He comes and stands in the midst of his disciples. Though his disciples have avoided him, he doesn’t avoid them. The sinful, betraying, avoiding disciples who don’t want to associate with Jesus in his woundedness, Jesus comes to them right there. And he doesn’t say, “How dare you betray me?”. He doesn’t say, “I thought we were friends.” He doesn’t say, “I am going to repay you for this.” No, he offers them one word: “Peace.” He promised his peace to them earlier, and now, he is here to offer it. I give you a peace that the world cannot give. Can you imagine: you’ve just abandoned your best friend; an especially meaningful relationship; someone with whom you’ve shared your heart and soul and life? The disciples had every reason to expect Jesus to make them pay for forsaking him. He comes instead with a word of gentle forgiveness.

To follow Christ is to first and foremost be people who've received Christ's forgiveness. And we really need his forgiveness.

Christians need to be the first to admit the ways we've denied the beauty and goodness of the earth. Christians underwrote Western conquest, expansion, and industrialization of the earth as a divine right; we had a divine mandate to become masters of creation. To deny our limits. It was Christians, those who had the story of Genesis open in their laps, that thought we were justified in commodifying, pillaging, exploiting the natural world; becoming in effect lords of God's creation. Christians felt okay doing this because they had heaven to fall back on: that place that the faithful can escape to to avoid the travails of flesh and time. Our tradition signed humanity's blank check to buy up and use the earth's resources. Apart of that legacy, we ought to be the loudest and clearest of those who've said that we've messed it up. We don't have to do this in chest-thumping guilt; to the contrary, we confess our sins because we have a Savior who forgives us: who, when we have avoided him and avoided his creation, never avoids us, but comes to us with a word of Peace.

We acknowledge our limits, we confess our sins, and then we receive and embody the peace Christ gives. Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace; it's a rich and layered word, and it implies more than just an interior state of peace. It means wholeness. My wholeness I give to you. The disciples have sealed themselves in fear; Jesus steps through their fear with an invitation to wholeness. See my wounds and become whole.

Christians ought to be the quickest to confess their sins, and the most confident in clinging to hope. The Body of Christ, huddled together in John 20, encountered by the Risen Christ, knows that death is NOT the end of the story. That wholeness - fullness of relationship - is where all things are headed. The wounds of the world will be born by the flesh of love. All creation shall be made well, shall be made whole. And I see Christ's word of wholeness more as an

invitation than a declaration. He invites us to take seriously our own wholeness. Which is ours when we live in tune with the created world. We don't engage the restoration of the planet in guilt and in fear. We engage in the restoration of creation because it's the way to become whole. God created us as fragile and limited, and yet beautiful and worthy participants in the created order. And the way to wholeness isn't by becoming more convinced of heaven, or more certain about God: the way to wholeness isn't to so much seek God in the heavens but in the soil.

The story we've gathered around this morning is the story of a God becoming flesh; God taking on dirt and earth and skin; living in our flesh, feeling our sun's rays, and the cool breezes of spring blow across his face; drawing inspiration from the lillies of the field and the birds of the air. Martin Luther talked about our down-to-earth God; our earthy God. Luther loved to remind people that God is way earthier than we are. Don't look up, but look down for God. Our wholeness as humans is in relationship to the earth. On your walks, when you pause and listen to the birds, when you step out on a spring night and notice the peepers, when you prune the rhododendron bush, when you throw an apple core into the compost bin, when you holler at the groundhog to get out of your garden – you are coming into contact with our earthy God. You are stepping into greater wholeness.

As strange as it may sound, you are stepping into greater wholeness too when you can give thanks even for your limitations – for the creak in your knees; for the little slips of memory; for your recent upgrade to tri-focals. Obviously these aren't happy things, but they are human things, and to become whole we give thanks for all of us. We can give thanks that while we aren't running 15 miles at a time, we still have some mobility; sure, no one wants to have an underlying condition, but we have to remember our deepest underlying condition is that we are loved as we are, and where are. It's one of the strange paradoxes that in embracing our limits we become whole; but I think its when we come to make

peace with all the selves we are not, all the lives we don't have, that we are able to inhabit the lives we do more fully.

It's true. Christianity began behind locked doors. And each generation has had to discern what doors it is hiding out behind. This creation care Sunday we can name that door for what it is. And yet, we're also ones that have discovered a grace that is among us even when the doors are shut; Christ's presence opens a new door for us. Through his forgiveness and peace, we receive an invitation to become whole. Remember: heaven is not some far off place; not something for us to fall back on at the end of our days. Heaven is God's realm suffusing earth now; relationships restored; shalom; groundhog and gorilla and dandelion and dogwood and humanity shining in the glory of God. Creation made whole. You can taste that wholeness now. You can march for that wholeness now. You can speak up for that wholeness now. You can celebrate it and savor it and seek it. And you can step outside, out from behind those doors, and through the touch of your love, you can leave a little heaven everywhere you go.

