

Easter 2 – Year C

We have been here too often before.

March 19th, Christchurch, in two mosques during Friday prayer...

More than 30 people killed going to or from religious services in Nigeria between Palm Sunday and Easter night
Easter suicide bombings in Sri Lanka...

And yesterday, another shooting at the Chabat Synagogue in Poway, California - six months to the day after the deadly shooting that killed 11 people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

I thought my homily was 'in the bag' – I was set to relax. And then I heard the news.

Today is the second Sunday of Easter. And what, pray tell, can these Scriptures speak to this moment?

We have been here too often before.

The Trail of Tears, the slave trade that enriched many and condemned others to abuse beyond imagining, a culture of privilege that got into the white American bloodstream so that prejudice and racism against anyone else became normalized, legislation that makes it a crime to try to save your family by walking 2000 miles while a statue in the harbor still says "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

We have been here too often before.

But even as I heard those words in my head, I knew that Jesus and the people of his time had the same experience. The Israelites had over and over again been in exile, captives in a foreign land. They had been enslaved. Their land and homes had been taken from them by the Roman occupation at the time of Jesus. Attempts at violent overthrows had only resulted in greater violence against them. Oh yes, Jesus knew the past and experienced it in his time.

Yet this Jesus proclaimed what he knew to be true, and what we heard from the prophet Baruch last week: The only way out of the violence, out of the domination, is to live the way of God.

You may or may not remember that last Sunday, I used a quote from John Dominic Crossan, an American theologian and former Roman Catholic priest. It was in reference to the Eastern church's focus on the *universal* resurrection – that Christ rises, gloriously triumphant, but that he takes all of humanity with him.

But Crossan is a theologian for *our* time. He, too, knows we have been here too often before. Crossan has said that the most serious threat to our world is escalating violence. He says, "As civilization's drug of choice, intensifying violence deludes us into believing that peace on earth will result from global control, that nonviolence will finally derive from consummate violence....Given our historic trajectory of escalatory violence, what can save our species from itself?...Very deliberately, Jesus of Nazareth lived by and died from incarnating one obvious answer—indeed, surely the only possible answer. Programmatic nonviolent resistance to violence alone can end civilization's trajectory of escalation."

On Easter – at the Great Vigil and on Easter Day – I said that the cross and the resurrection are so united that we cannot have one without the other. And I said that, as well as we know the instruction that to follow Jesus we must take up our cross, we are also called to *take up* our resurrection. The Gospel passage we have today from John leads us deeper into both of those ideas – and we need to hear it today as we have never – and yet perhaps as we have *always* needed it before. This passage is so important that we hear it *every year* on this Second Sunday of Easter. Why is it so important? Because John is telling us what the resurrection is about, what resurrected life looks like, and thus he is telling us how we are to take up our own resurrection. What makes John's version so different from the other evangelists' accounts? The three things that appear in John's account and nowhere else are the Risen Christ's wounds, his breath, and his forgiveness

None of the other gospels mention wounds in the Resurrected Christ. Mark has no mention of the *body* of the resurrected Christ at all, only that he appeared. Matthew says that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary saw Jesus when they were leaving the tomb, and "they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him." No wounds, only his feet. Finally, Luke has an account of Jesus suddenly appearing in the midst of the disciples gathered in Jerusalem, so startled that they thought they were seeing a ghost. "Touch me and see," he says, "For a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." The mention of hands and feet, flesh and bones, is a demonstration that Jesus is real, not a ghost. There is no mention of any wounds in Luke's account either.

For John the mystic, though, these wounds are important. It is Jesus's *wounds* that Jesus uses to identify himself to the disciples, wounds that Thomas demands to *touch* before he will believe. John tells us unequivocally that the suffering of the cross and the glory of the resurrection are linked. We cannot have one without the other. We are invited to acknowledge our own woundedness – and find God living there. The wounds of Christ are testimony to the effects of violence – but the Resurrected Christ experienced by the disciples is testimony to the effects of God.

The internet – Facebook, in particular, I think – is full of stories that move our hearts. A dog rescued from a watery death by a stranger willing to enter those same treacherous waters to pull the dog to safety. A young basketball player who lifts the shortest, youngest, most inept player so that he can finally make a basket himself. The recipient of a heart transplant bringing a stethoscope with him as he meets the parents of the young woman who died and donated her heart, so they can hear her heart beating in him. These are all moments of new life coming to the place of woundedness. And our hearts are stirred by these stories because *we recognize resurrection when we see it*. And we can find and recognize those moments in our own life – but only if we are willing to look at the wounds first. Remember that it was Mary who first saw the Risen Christ, because she dared to face the empty tomb. The resurrected life, Christ's resurrection and *our* resurrection, includes our own woundedness and the woundedness of those around us.

The next thing John tells us is that Jesus commissions us. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this to them, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The word used to describe Jesus breathing on the disciples in this passage, according to Scripture scholar Sandra Schneiders, is used only two other times in Scripture: To describe God breathing life into creation, and to describe God's breathing new life into the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision.

And this special description of Jesus breathing on the disciples would not have been lost to the first hearers of John's gospel. Jesus is breathing the very life breath of God into his followers, just as God did at creation, and just as God did to restore the dry bones of Israel. We are given life – and that life, even if we have let it dry out and decay, is restored by this breath of the Risen Christ. But remember the words that came before: "As the Father sent me, so I send you..."

Richard Voelz, Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship at Union Seminary in Virginia, says it this way: *“We too are the people who receive the breath of the Spirit and receive our life from it. We are the people through whom God breathes new life into the world in Jesus’ name. As God breathes the life-giving Spirit in us, we in turn are the people who breathe the energy, the life, the creating force of God into this world. We mimic this beautiful exchange between Jesus and the disciples. As God has breathed onto and into us with new life, so we breathe life and the creative force of resurrection into the world.”* Resurrected life breathes life into the world. And our world desperately needs this breath of God now. If nothing else, as you wait for sleep in your bed at night, breathe in the life-giving Spirit of God into your own awareness, and then consciously breathe that same Spirit out into the world.

Finally, Jesus says this to the disciples: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” In other words, we have the power to forgive – but we can also hold someone bound. In the Resurrected life Jesus is showing us, though, the choice is clear. For this One, who from the cross forgave those responsible for his crucifixion, stands in the midst of those who abandoned and denied him, and greets them with “Peace” – “Shalom” – “Salaam” – not once, but three times. The crucified and Resurrected Christ forgives – and so we, too, are empowered to forgive, to let go.

I was grateful that what I heard most in the comments surrounding yesterday’s tragedy were ones of rededication to supporting one another, affirmations of values held in common by a community that just recently held an interfaith celebration, and pledges to “get through this together.” I did not hear calls for retaliation or retribution or punishment. Yes, my heart was grateful – and hopeful. And just before I sat down to rewrite this homily, I saw a post from a cousin with whom I thoroughly disagree much of the time... She wrote: “If you are wondering why God didn’t do something, He did. He created you and me. It’s up to us to do something.”

Yes, I believe there is great wisdom in the Church’s choice to give us this Gospel passage each year on this Sunday, to help us see what it means for us to believe in resurrection, what it means to *take up* our resurrection. Quoting Richard Voelz once again as he speaks of the Resurrection:

“We cannot prove it. But we can live it. Disciples who believe resurrection, live resurrection: we form our lives in the way of the one who sends us, we passionately pursue peace, we breathe into the world the life that has been breathed into us, we let go through forgiveness.”

Yes, let us hang on to that phrase: “Disciples who believe resurrection, live resurrection.” That is what we prayed in today’s collect:

“Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith.”

May it be so.
Amen.

- [Acts 5:27-32](#)
- [Revelation 1:4-8](#)
- [John 20:19-31](#)
- [Psalm 118:14-29](#)
- or [Psalm 150](#)