

“RESURRECTION MEANS LETTING GO”

The Rev. Victor Kim

John 20:19-31

(04-24-22)

So Easter has already passed, now what? Over the course of Holy Week, we heard much about Jesus and the love of God for us expressed so vividly, vulnerably, passionately, faithfully, in Christ, in his obedience, his suffering, his death and his resurrection. Amazingly, however, much of the world still journeys through the Easter season, mostly unaffected by what is the pivotal point of history, maybe because we have become so accustomed to hearing and repeating that Jesus is risen from the dead. Our problem is that information isn't the same as transformation. (Mark Batterson, *Forward to The Furious Longing of God* by Brennan Manning)

We take in all this information but it doesn't lead to substantive change, to transformation. We know that God loves us, that's information. But unless that information moves from the head to the heart, unless we begin to live out what that information is meant to convey, holistically, we never experience the transformation that God desires and intends for us in God's love. So how do we truly live as a resurrection people, how do we move from information to transformation?

It's no coincidence that the first text we encounter on this the first Sunday after Easter is the story of Jesus appearing to his disciples. The disciples have, true to form, courageously locked themselves in a room, hiding out from the authorities. I wonder what it must have been like to be in that room? Was anyone talking to anyone else? Were they too broken-hearted, were they too afraid? Or were they too ashamed? Was Peter living over and over again the words he had so confidently spoken just a few days ago, "Even if all fall away, I will not?" Were the rest of the disciples thinking about the bravado with which they had insisted that they were ready to die with Jesus, only to now suffer a fate which was perhaps even worse than death itself? The room was a tomb, locked from the inside out, where shame and guilt ate away at the disciples, leaving them more dead than alive. At least they were together, after all misery loves company.

But suddenly, in the evening of that first Easter day, Jesus came and stood among them. The gospel writer has no interest in explaining how Jesus got through the locked doors, after all, if you can rise from the dead, you deserve some leeway, don't you? I wonder what the disciples were thinking that first moment when they realized that Jesus was in their midst. But before they get to say anything, or perhaps even think anything, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." Instead of, 'Where were you when I needed you most?' Rather than, 'Thanks for nothing!' As opposed to, 'How could all of you abandon me like that, after all I did for you?' Jesus says, "Peace be with you." And those words set the disciples free and for the first time in what must have seemed to be an eternity, the disciples rejoiced. Peace be with you. Twice Jesus says these healing, restoring words. But Jesus hasn't just come to make the disciples feel better, just to cheer them up. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Unbelievably, these same feckless deserters who had abandoned him in his time of trial, were going to be the leading edge of the newness that God had in mind for creation! But Jesus knew that left to their own devices, not even a resurrection appearance or two would sustain them for the journey which lay ahead of them. So he breathed on them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Just as when God's Spirit breathed

on the first creations in the Garden of Eden, so again, the Spirit of God breathes new life into these fragile disciples, changing them into new creations. And before he leaves them, Jesus tells the disciples that they now have the power to forgive sins or not. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. Amazing, isn't it!

For many years I always read that last part the same way. Now that these disciples had received the Holy Spirit, they had the power to do what Jesus did, namely, to forgive sins. And so if they chose to forgive sins, they were forgiven and if they didn't, the sins were not forgiven. I always marveled at the power that Jesus gave his disciples. The power to forgive or not to forgive. But over the years, I've come to realize how dangerous this power actually is.

Listen to what Jesus says again. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. It's not actually as simple as it seems. The forgiving part seems fairly straight forward. If you forgive, they are forgiven. But if you retain the sins of any, if you don't choose to forgive, then the sins are retained. But retained by who, that's the pivotal question. Who retains them? The text is a bit ambiguous, but our experience isn't so ambiguous, is it? When you choose not to forgive someone who has hurt you, who is most affected by that unwillingness to forgive? If your experience is anything like mine, it's not the offender who is most affected, it's me. When I choose not to forgive, I retain the sins. I retain all the hurt, all the pain and all the anger. The dangerous part of having the power to forgive those who sin against us is what happens when we choose not to exercise that ability to forgive.

When instead of, Peace be with you, we respond with, you can rot in hell, or you're only getting what you deserve, when we retain the sins of any, then we really do retain them. Part of living as a resurrection people is to remember the first words of the risen Christ to his disciples, peace be with you. I forgive you, you are forgiven, be at peace. There is no peace without forgiveness, without reconciliation. Not for us or for those of us who need to be forgiven or those who we need to forgive.

We need to remember the words of Jesus, the next time we are faced with the choice to forgive or to retain. We need to learn to let go. When we don't, when we can't, it's like we shut the door on ourselves and lock ourselves in. We lock ourselves into a place where by a lack of movement, a lack of nourishment, a lack of grace, our spirits become stagnant and begin to rot and die. We don't need anyone else to help us, what we decide to retain in our hearts will eat us up from the inside out. A phrase from our recent Lenten Bible Study stuck with me. Refusal to forgive leads to bitterness, and bitterness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies. We need to be letting go.

When forgiveness is only information it does nothing. You can think all you want about forgiveness, you can believe all you want about what Jesus has done for us in forgiving us. We can believe all we want that we are a forgiving people, but until we start living it out, until we start to do what is really hard, until the information in the head makes its way to the heart, nothing happens. That we have to forgive is not simply an inspirational idea, it is a transformative way of life and we need to be about letting go of that anger, bitterness and hatred. As long as all we do is debate the merits of forgiveness and wonder about the results, and do nothing about it, it will do nothing for us.

I know that none of this is easy in any way. When you find it hard to think about forgiving someone, try for a moment to put yourself in Jesus' place. How would Jesus treat that person? I know that we aren't Jesus and that we can't possibly be expected to live like him. Henri Nouwen said that imitating Jesus doesn't mean that we have to live a life like his, but that we have to live our lives as authentically as Jesus lived his life. (Henri Nouwen, "The Wounded Healer") Maybe we won't be walking on water or making the blind to see, but to live authentically does leave open all sorts of possibilities as to what our lives might look like, doesn't it?

Brennan Manning, in his book, "The Furious Longing of God," says that in times of persecution, theoretical Christianity will collapse. When you absolutely need to forgive, when only forgiveness will lead us out of those tombs into which we have locked ourselves, when it's so very hard to forgive, when you think that you just can't forgive any more, that's when theory gives way to reality, when information makes way for transformation. That's when we discover whether the words of God hold any true power or not.

Living as a resurrection people means that we have to be about letting go, we have to be about forgiveness. We have to be, because that's how God chose to be. God could have chosen to retain our sins, but God chose to forgive us and free us. Jesus could have retained the sins of the disciples, but he chose to forgive them. Peace be with you. As an Easter resurrection people, will we forgive or will we end up behind the locked doors of our own choosing?

I know it is hard and many of us will resist. And I know that I don't know, and I can't know, the extent to which you have been wronged and how difficult even considering this is for you. But I do know that it won't ever get any less difficult, it won't ever get any easier to forgive, if all we ever do is think about and not act upon it.

Lewis Smedes, the preacher and teacher, wrote about forgiveness this way. When someone betrays us or takes advantage of us or lets us down, the hurt goes deep. What makes the pain worse is that you were wronged. You didn't have it coming. Nobody deserves to be treated the way you were treated. It wasn't fair. But one thing is for sure, you cannot change what happened, there is no delete button for the past. You can't erase it from your mind. It's like a video tape sewn inside your head and every time it plays it rerun, you feel the pain all over again.

The question is whether we will spend the rest of our lives with this pain, with this pain we did not deserve to get in the first place, or whether we will choose to be rid of it, healed, freed from it, whether we will choose to forgive. When you forgive a person who wronged you, you set a prisoner free, and then you discover that the prisoner you set free was you. (Lewis Smedes, "Five Things Everyone Should Know About Forgiving")

It's about transformation. It is no small thing that the first thing that the risen Christ said to his disciples, as he sent them as the Father had sent him, as he breathed his Spirit upon them, was to go and be about forgiveness. Forgiveness is where resurrection starts. Without forgiveness, there is no resurrection. Without God's commitment to our forgiveness, there is no reason for Jesus to have died or to have been resurrected. Without our commitment to be a forgiving people, not only to think about it, but to live it and do it, we really can't know the transforming, healing, life giving power of resurrection as God has intended for us.

Another part of our Bible Study stated, forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. Your feelings are real, but if you wait to forgive until you “feel like it,” it may never happen. You can choose to obey God and forgive today. Someday your feelings might catch up with your choice.

Friends, if we want to live as a resurrection people, we need to be about letting go. Behind the doors where we have locked ourselves up in anger, in hurt, in hatred, in pain, Jesus appears. And his words to us are the same words he spoke on that first Easter evening. Peace be with you.

May the Spirit of God, breathed upon us by Jesus our risen Lord, re-create us and transform us, to be a forgiven, forgiving people.

And to God be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen.