

“Peace Be With You”

Acts 3:12-19
Luke 24: 36b-48

Rev. Liz Miller
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If you were in church last week, you might be thinking that the gospel story this morning sounds familiar. If you weren't here, or maybe you were and you don't remember, last week's story is almost identical to this week's story. It was the Gospel of John instead of the Gospel of Luke, and some of the language is different, but it's basically the same story. I can promise you that this was not a computer error or a miscommunication between the ministers. It is three weeks after Easter, and we are still proclaiming the same resurrection story. In fact, we will be singing Easter hymns and talking about resurrection until the end of May, so don't put away your bonnets just yet.

I've always thought of Easter as one of many parts of the Christian faith. I considered it a small part of a varied year of celebrations and living out of different tenants of our faith. It was only recently that I began to understand Easter and the days leading up to it as the whole of our faith. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter morning encapsulate everything we believe as Christians. Those three days say it all. On Maundy Thursday we show humility and service, and demonstrate the fullness of Christian community. On Good Friday we experience betrayal and the grief of losing a loved one to needless suffering. On Easter we are present as love overcomes that violence, and death is trumped by life. In those three days we experience the passion, the pain, and the hope that occurs throughout our lives. We live out these same feelings as we go through different stages and experiences as we each walk down our paths. We have times when we feel humbled by what an individual has done for us and are inspired to do the same for others. Who hasn't felt betrayal of a friend at one point in their life? And, many of us can name a moment when a time of sorrow turned into celebration like when the women found the empty tomb. These are all a part of the Easter experience. In worship, it is just

intensified and consolidated to three days, and then we end up where we are today—spending the next two months trying to understand it and live in a new way. So often when we experience something jarring or life altering, the event may take place in a day or an hour, or even an instant! It is the extended time after that we spend processing what happened, trying to make sense of it. We try to forget or remember, to move on or return to the way things were. It may take days or weeks or years. It is a process. A long, messy process full of sadness and joy. This is our Easter season.

When Jesus encounters the disciples on the road, they have had an intense few days. They were at the last supper, they saw the trial that sentenced Jesus to death, and then they watched him die on the cross before their eyes. They are traumatized, and they are just beginning to grieve, and now they have reports that Jesus is alive. Is it any wonder they don't recognize Jesus? Even when they do recognize him, they react with shock, disbelief, and terror—and I think that is mighty graceful of them considering all they just went through. For them, the celebration that comes with the resurrection is meshed together with a whole range of emotions as they seek to understand what they have been through and keep up with how their reality keeps shifting. Yes, they are amazed that Jesus is alive, but that does not make them forget the betrayal they all experienced together as they watched Jesus be crucified. Their hope is restored but their grief lingers.

Jesus' response to these exhausted, confused, and fearful disciples is, "Peace be with you." "Peace be with you" is like balm on an open wound. It is a tall glass of ice water when you are parched. Because it is not a call to action. It is a call to pay attention to yourself and your emotions. "Peace be with you" is the opportunity to be present to yourself and what you are feeling. We have seen death, and we have seen life renewed, and Jesus says, "peace be with you." Just breathe. Check in and see how you're feeling. Take some time...Don't spring away from this Easter resurrection, but learn to live in it, adjust so that you can begin to experience the world through the lens of Easter. "Peace be with you" is such a sweet relief for all tired disciples.

The experience of Easter is a personal one. It is something that is a little bit different for each

one of us, because no matter how many people witness the same event, our personalities and experiences and histories will make it mean something different from one person to the next. Easter is personal. The feelings are unique and while there are threads of the same emotion that are woven between us, the ways in which we feel them vary. That's why each year when we approach Easter, we each approach it differently. Many of us look forward to Maundy Thursday each year, but forget there is a Good Friday service. Some of us are the first to sign up for the Easter vigil, but can't come to worship. Some reflect quietly, alone, about Jesus' final days, and then wake up early for the sunrise service. When we encounter something that shakes us to the core, just as the disciples did when they witnessed the death and resurrection of Jesus, our responses might be so very different from our neighbors. And that's okay. Some of us might be fearful, some confused, and some might not be able to feel anything at all. Many of us are trying, tentatively, to deal with grief in healthy, full ways, while others of us want to skip that whole part all together to get to the big family supper and egg hunt. Don't get me wrong, Easter is a celebration and I enjoy the day as much as anyone else, maybe more because I do own a pair of big bunny ears. But there is also more to Easter than we often dwell on or think about when we plan for the day. Easter is not over.

In the coming weeks as we continue to return to the themes of Easter, I hope you realize that this is also an opportunity to get well with your soul. When you think of those Easter moments in your life, what are the lingering emotions or how are they affecting you? What are you still grappling with? When you hear, "Peace be with you," what are the things within you that are not yet at peace? Pay attention to them. Stay with any discomfort you might feel. When we encounter ourselves in this way, that is when we learn and grow and feel and experience life at its most full. Philosopher Jim Rohn once said, "Learning is the beginning of wealth. Learning is the beginning of health. Learning is the beginning of spirituality. Searching and learning is where the miracle process all begins." Easter is a time for personal growth when we can confront those moments we would rather forget. It might be growth for yourself, for your family, or for your community. Whatever it is, it is personal. Easter is

more than a one day celebration—it is a call to wrestle with past suffering and to reconcile it with the hope of life and ever lasting love.

I heard a story this week that really brought that home for me.

I have been working on a project for the Connecticut Conference's Annual Meeting next month with Eric Anderson, the Conference's Minister of Communications and Technology. Eric and I interviewed and filmed a bunch of people, and this past Wednesday, when we ran out of people, Eric sat down in front of the camera for his own interview. When we were done with the standard questions for our project, he said “Ask me why I'm wearing a Hawaiian shirt!” Eric is a fun enough guy that I didn't think it was odd for him to be wearing a Hawaiian shirt, but I humored him. I should also note that on his colorful shirt, he was wearing a red comma, a common symbol for the United Church of Christ. Again, I assumed this was standard for him—perhaps part of the Conference staff's uniform. It turns out there was a story behind both the comma and the Hawaiian shirt. Luckily, I got his story on video and he agreed to let me share it with you. All of the following words are Eric's, unedited and unabridged.

“Why are you wearing a Hawaiian shirt?”

“This is not my normal apparel. In fact, today is the very first day in my entire life I have worn a Hawaiian shirt. I am wearing it today to honor a friend of mine who died on Good Friday. He was a man of huge good humor and exuberance and he loved Hawaiian shirts. Today is his birthday. His friends are wearing Hawaiian shirts in his honor. You see, that's one of the cores of the faith for me. This is the faith that doesn't make sense in the encounter with death. This is the faith that provides hope and reassurance and comfort and probability of power in the face of death. This year I didn't want to celebrate Easter because I lost a friend on Good Friday. He wasn't a Christian either, so the irony of him dying on Good Friday I'm sure has him still laughing. I really did not want to go to Easter and celebrate

the resurrection that close to the death of my friend. What I found of course was that the proclamation of resurrection does not end grief, but it comforts it. Easter, the Christian message of Christ's resurrection is not about when it's easy. It's at its best when it's hard. So here I am in my flowered, semi-Easter Hawaiian shirt, and I added my own touch of course, because I added the comma. In memory of that great not-Christian theologian, Gracie Allen, who had the grace to leave this word for us, "Never put a period where God has placed a comma." Whether that be about the inclusion of people in the community or in the church, whether that be about how we're going to organize a society for social, economic, political justice for all it's citizens for that matter for all those who sojourn among us, or whether that be about what is the end of life. So many in the world say it's a period, well, my shirt says it's a comma."

Peace be with you.