

JOHN 20: 19-31. Peace and Earth Day. 2019

Last Sunday, on Easter morning, we celebrated the changing of the church seasons between Lent and Easter by recovering our hidden “Alleluia!” Traditionally, the Alleluia word is buried or covered over or somehow hidden during the solemnity of Lent, in order to be a part of the resurrection joy of Easter morning, when it reappears. The first Sunday in Lent, our children had symbolically “buried” the Alleluia---a piece of paper with a crayon colored Alleluia upon it—behind the large worship book on our altar. On Easter, they recovered it and raised it up again, along with Christ. I asked them to count how many times we would sing or say Alleluia during the service, now that it was Easter. Sadie told me she counted 19 Alleluia’s, which sounds about right. If there is one word we might associate with Easter morning, it would be Alleluia! The ancient Hebrew word meaning “Praise the Lord.”

But *this* morning and throughout the remainder of the season of Easter there could be a different word of which we might be aware and on the watch for, and that word is “peace”---shalom in Hebrew. That rich word occurs 3 times in just our lesson for today alone, and it will show up in many of our Scriptures and hymns throughout the 7 week season of Easter. The setting for this morning’s lesson, which encompasses a week in time, is the evening of the first Easter day. As you recall from Luke’s Gospel lesson last Sunday, there were several women who encountered the empty tomb and the angelic messenger on Easter morning. Although the women go immediately and report what happened to the remaining disciples, they are not believed. Who would easily believe that Christ was raised from the dead without seeing firsthand at least an angelic messenger, if not the risen Christ Himself? Yet, later that same evening, those

unbelieving, remaining disciples gathered together. There were only 10 of them, huddling behind locked doors, fearing that at any moment, they too could be arrested and executed for their association with Jesus. There were only 10, because Judas had hung himself after betraying His Lord, and *Thomas wasn't there*. We don't know why not! But for whatever reason, he doesn't gather in community with the others, and he doesn't see what they see. *They* see the risen Christ, wounds and all, stand before them. *Thomas* does not. They tell him all about it, but gosh---some things you really need to see firsthand before they become real to you, right? And this would be one of those things, a man risen from the dead. Which prompts Thomas to passionately declare, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." This is why we call him a doubter—he thinks what they're telling him is too good to be true, so it probably isn't. But though he doubts, there must also be some wild hope within him. Because the next Sunday, today almost 2000 years ago, when the disciples gather again, Thomas makes sure he's there.

The setting is similar to the previous week, except this time the door is shut, but not locked as it had been the first night. The disciples who saw their risen Lord remain cautious, but they are not as fearful as they had been. And again, Jesus appears, and Thomas gets the opportunity to have his doubts and needs personally addressed by the risen Christ. He gets to see and touch the wounds, and he is overcome by the experience. "My Lord and my God!" he responds, falling at Christ's feet. I almost wonder why we don't call him "Blest Thomas" instead of "Doubting Thomas", because think of how *blest* he was—the risen Lord actually appeared and addressed his specific struggles and doubts. What wouldn't we give to have that kind of experience? And think about it---where did Thomas have this experience? Sitting off by himself

somewhere in intense prayer and solitary agony? Not at all! He had it within the midst of the gathered community of faith at that time. And he missed it the first time around, because he had *not been a part* of the gathered community. Which demonstrates to us, that while we certainly may have individual faith experiences while alone, it is *primarily within Christian community* that our faith is shaped and sustained. That's why there's church! And I believe it is also as a community that we can best impact the world around us, accomplishing together what we could not accomplish individually. This is true not only for how we live out our faith for the sake of the people around us, but also for how we live out our faith for the sake of the created world around us. And on Earth Day Sunday, in this briefer meditation, I want us to think for a few minutes about how we can extend to the world what Jesus extends in this lesson to his disciples and to us---and that is the gift of Shalom, peace, that theme of the Easter season.

Our lesson today includes two separate encounters---in each of these encounters between the risen Jesus and his disciples he begins by saying, "Peace be with you." He says it twice in the first encounter, for a total of three times in just these 12 verses. In next Sunday's lesson, the risen Jesus will appear to his friends by the seaside, and he will again greet them by saying, "Peace be with you." Consistently and persistently, the risen Christ wishes his friends to be at peace.

We need to refresh our understanding of what the word "peace" means within a Biblical context. Particularly since we tend to associate "Peace" with another word that makes up a three word phrase: peace and quiet. Ahh, we long for peace and quiet. And so, we associate quiet with peace. We tend to think of peace as the absence of noise, of activity, of conflict. Which makes it a passive kind of state and is not what the Hebrew word Shalom expresses at all. One

Biblical scholar pointed out that when he arrives home to his large family and all is strangely quiet, that he doesn't feel at peace at all; he knows something must be wrong. We get that---too much quiet in a full household makes us suspicious and uneasy! But, if he returns to a house of activity, laughter, somebody fussing at someone, and so on, he experiences the true sense of shalom---the sense that all is well, all is in balance, all is at it should be. Shalom is not so much a word describing the absence of something, like noise or conflict. It's instead a word describing the fullness of something: to experience shalom means to experience wellness, wholeness, harmony, completeness. And shalom is not merely a gift given by Christ to people, but rather a gift from God to all of creation. Again and again, we can read in the Old Testament prophetic words about a world at peace, where lions and lambs lie down together, where there is enough food for all so that no one goes hungry, where heaven and earth are renewed, as well as humanity. Shalom, peace, is God's intention for all of creation. And when we think about peace in regards to creation, we may want to pair "peace" up with a different word than "quiet" as in "peace and quiet." We may want to pair it up with the word "just" as in justice. This is, in fact, the theme for the Synod Assembly this coming weekend, which Randi and I will attend. The theme is: "Just peace", as in "Peace, with justice". Peace, in the Biblical sense of Shalom, is well paired with justice, because when peace incorporates justice, we have true shalom or harmony, as opposed to a false peace and quiet, where we've temporarily stilled some noisy voices but actually have solved nothing.

Thinking then about shalom, about just peace, in regards to Creation and Earth Day, we find ourselves confronting some tough questions. Is it just that as Americans we make up around 5 % of the earth's population, but we use around 25% of the world's energy resources? Are we

contributing to shalom for those who come after us, if our choices today are based on short-sighted convenience rather than long term good for many? Is it just that our pesticides kill off pollinators, who as we have seen, are part of a wonderfully intricate design of our Creator God, where even the smallest and buzziest creatures play a crucial role? Do we bring shalom to the world if we fail to reduce and reuse and recycle and continue to imagine, in our hubris, that the Created order is really all about us? God's care for all that God creates is evident throughout Scripture and the tradition of the church. From bees to elephants, blue whales to hummingbirds, earthworms to humanity; God's intent is shalom: peace with justice, a balance among elements, a harmony that is life giving for the common good. And as noted earlier, our actions in this direction as individuals are crucial, but our corporate actions, our community attitude and activity, is probably where we make the greatest impact. Even the scared, confused disciples in our lesson this morning knew that they were strongest together, and that's where Christ meets them. We also recognize Christ in our midst when we gather together and do good for the world around us. I think we could celebrate some contributions we've made together towards Creation shalom: we've been replacing old bulbs with LEDs; we are a part of the solar energy garden; we have recycle bins and compost bins; we have reduced our use of plastic, paper, and Styrofoam; we have a Creation Care task force that publishes ecofriendly suggestions in our monthly newsletter; even our Columbarium is an environmentally friendly way to deal with burial. And we have suggestions now from this morning on ways to create a more peaceful and just environment for bees. Does that matter, one might ask? Bees seem like small denominators in the entire currency of our planet. But as we've learned, yes, it does matter. The smallest elements contribute to the shalom and the just peace of the whole. Even bees. Even us. Even

our small congregation. As one hymn reminds us, “The Lord God made us all”. And the Lord God extends just peace and shalom to us and to the whole creation and calls us to do likewise.

Amen.