

**Second Sunday of Easter – March 30, 2008
St. John's Episcopal Church, Charleston, WV
John 20:19-31 – Peace Be With You**

The Rev. Kent Higgins

My thoughts today are in response to the Gospel, and have to do with two things: rooms in which we live our lives, and what we might call “famous first words.”

Many of us have gathered in our dining rooms or our living rooms with friends or family to observe some special occasion in our lives. Sometimes it is a happy time – who cannot remember a table decorated for a birthday? Sometimes it is a time of sadness. What comes to my mind is a meal after a family member has died – a mixture of sorrow and, if the loved one was a leader in the family, some anxiety about what comes next, about how we will deal with things now that the person is dead.

The disciples of Jesus experienced both kinds of room.

The Gospel is set in a room, with the remaining disciples gathered together, wondering what will happen next. It is a far different group from that which gathered in the upper room on Maundy Thursday.

For one thing, there were then twelve disciples, but Judas, who betrayed his master, is no more. Now there are eleven, meeting in a locked room “for fear of the Jews.”¹

¹ John 20:19 NRSV.

What a remarkable transition. The Passover dinner is as intimate an occasion as exists in the New Testament. It was a respite from the on-rushing events of the week, events which must have been an emotional blur to the disciples. At the beginning of the week, they were at the heights of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And now, after the crucifixion, they have fallen to the depths of despair.

These men – never entirely sure what was going on with Jesus, usually getting it slightly wrong as he sought to have them understand his mission – these men are now hiding, in fear for their very lives. Only three days before the crowds had demanded that Jesus be crucified, and it was easy to think that his disciples would be next.

When I think of those disciples, I cannot imagine their being much of a threat to Rome. Jesus was a problem for Pilate precisely because he aroused the crowds. The disciples threatened no one. And that's important, because it demonstrates that these men were not, in and of themselves, born leaders who rebounded from the death of their founder and went on to continue his mission on their own.

Exactly the opposite is true. The disciples were lost, alone, and frightened. Left leaderless, the most they could do was to lock the door, and hope they would not be the next ones to die.

They certainly did not rush out to start what we now know as Christianity.

Yet, here we are today, remembering and celebrating those days. What happened to make the church possible? What caused the disciples to become truly different men?

The answer, of course, is they saw Jesus. They saw the resurrected man who was their leader, the man they knew with absolute certainty had died on a Roman cross only a few hours before. Jesus came into the room and spoke to them.

And this leads us to the category of “famous first words.” Not “last words” – there are many books about what people have said on their death beds. For most of us, “first words” are associated with babies, and the choice is usually between “da da” and “ma ma,” It is rare, perhaps unique, to have recorded the first words of an adult – in this case, the first words of the risen Lord.

And Jesus said to his demoralized disciples, “Peace be with you.”²

The man who had died appeared to them and greeted them.

The Greek word used in the Bible for “peace,” *eirēnē*, is one which is difficult to render in the single English word “peace.” *Eirēnē* is closely related in meaning to the Hebrew word *shalom*. Neither is translated simply as “good morning,” or, in the case of Jesus seeing the disciples after his resurrection, “hi guys – how’s things?”

Eirēnē and *shalom* are far more complex than that. At its root, *shalom* means “to be complete, perfect, and full.” It is much more than the absence of war and conflict; much more than peace as opposed to war. It carries instead the concept of completeness, of being perfected.

Granted, the Greek *eirēnē* is not quite the same as *shalom*, but it’s very close. The angels understood at His birth that Jesus was to be the great peace-

²*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 20:19). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

bringer, as they called out, “Glory to God in the highest: and on earth *peace*, goodwill toward men!”

You see, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, into which we are all baptized, is a restoring of creation as God intended it to be.

Remember Genesis, when God completes creation? “And God saw all that he had made and it was very good”³ The parable of Adam and Eve is one in which sin is unknown, and even “good and evil” do not exist.⁴ God engages in re-creation in Jesus Christ.

We don’t step back inside the Garden, but with the statement “Peace be with you,”⁵ Jesus turns the mood of his disciples from sorrow to joy. And he does more than change their mood – he goes on: ““Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.””⁶

The disciples hadn’t understood. And if *they* didn’t, little wonder then that *we* sometimes don’t.

When Jesus breathes on his disciples, it is the same breath of creation that we read of in Genesis. It is the breath we know in the hymn, “Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love, and do

³ Genesis 1:31.

⁴Freedman, D. N. (1996, c1992). *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (5:206). New York: Doubleday.

⁵ John 20:19, NRSV.

⁶*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 20:21-23). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

what thou wouldst do. Breathe on me, Breath of God, so shall I never die; but live with thee the perfect life of thine eternity.”

And now the disciples are changed. Now they are men to be reckoned with. Now they will spread the good news of the Gospel far and wide.

“Peace be with you.” What a profound statement. In somewhat longer fashion, trying in English to get to the real underlying meaning, “May the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.” Or, as we will say at the end of the service, “Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.”

We are the successors to those original disciples of Jesus. Their mission has become our mission. The strength Jesus gave them is given to us. The completeness which changed their lives is working in ours.

So *shalom*, my brothers and sisters, go out in peace, filled with the breath and spirit of God. Go out, and keep changing the world!