

## **“Empowered to Forgive”**

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, April 3, 2016  
Second Sunday of Easter**

**Readings from Scripture: Revelation 1:4-8 and John 20:19-31**

*John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

*To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father; to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

*Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.*

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

*Revelation 1:4-8*

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*

*But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”*

*A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

*John 20:19-31*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that we carry within, the words we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from scripture and words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ, and let that word do its work within our hearts, among us as a community of faith and

through us out into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Sometime on Wednesday or Thursday of this coming week, just over a hundred volunteers of the National Response Team of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance will be arriving in St. Louis for their annual meeting. This will be the second year in a row that we have met here in St. Louis (I am a member of this team) and the purpose of our time together is to have fellowship with each other, to learn about the best ways and best practices for showing up in times of disaster whether it be flooding or tornado damage, whether it be a church that's destroyed due to fire or arson, whether it's a situation of violence that rocks the community, or when a minister takes his or her own life. All of these situations, someone from the National Response Team will attend to. Part of the training, like I said, is best practices. But one of the most important things that we teach and that we need to remember, and I think it's not just for people that respond to disasters, but I think for all of us as Christians, it is important for us to remember, is that the most important thing that we offer anyone is a ministry of presence. We talk about that all the time in disaster work, but I can tell you that in pastoral work and in the work of sometimes just being someone's friend, the ministry of presence is the most important thing. Sometimes we think that we need to show up and say the right thing. We need to show up and have the right answer to a question that may be asked. We need to show up and be able to testify to our trust and faith and belief in God. But what we teach in the National Response Team and what I want us to think about today, is that the most important thing we do is show up. What we say comes later.

Often when people are frantic or afraid or frustrated or angry or scared, they remember anything that gets said. But they will remember if you showed up. They will remember if you were the one who rang their doorbell that night after they found out they had cancer and you had the courage to show up even though you didn't know what to say to them. You showed up. Maybe you had a card or a casserole or a hug, but you showed up. And that's what matters.

I was thinking about us coming together as volunteers for the denomination and thinking about us as Christians after Easter talking about a ministry of presence, and the question that bubbled up for me was, "what kind of presence are we to have?" What kind of presence are we to have? Especially as we gather this week after Easter Sunday, after the resurrection of Jesus and after the beautiful celebration, we come to this text and we see Jesus, in a sense, having ministry of presence. His disciples are locked in a room at night, they are afraid. The sun has set, darkness has once again filled their world. They are worried that the people who called for Jesus' crucifixion will now identify them as disciples and come after them. They are not sure what's going to happen. They are not sure how they are going to get through the next week. They don't know anything that's going on in their world. They are afraid and hunkered down and Jesus shows up in their midst and the first words he says to the disciples are, "Peace be with you."

Being a nerd who went to seminary, in the Greek it's even a little bit better than that. He says, "Peace to you." So he doesn't say it as it's a promise that something is going to be yours, he gives it to them. Peace to you. I don't know about you, but I'm thinking if I were the savior of the universe, the chosen one of God, God's only son who suffered crucifixion on a cross, who was taken down and put in a tomb, who three days later found himself coming out of the tomb and I found my followers, who I'd been with for three years, locked behind closed doors, huddled in fear, in the dark, not being sure of anything, I don't think I'd have it in me to have my first words to them be "Peace to you." I imagine if you or I were Jesus, we'd come to the disciples and say something like, "What are you doing? Don't you understand? Didn't you get it? I'm alive. I won. We all won. We can be victorious. Death has no more control in our life. We don't need to be afraid of anything. Come on, people, let's get on with it." But instead, Jesus says to them, "Peace to you." He doesn't say "Salvation to you." He doesn't say, "Victory to you." He doesn't say, "You need to believe more or less." He simply says, "Peace to you." And then he goes on and he says it again, "Peace to you." The scripture says he

breathes on them with intent or with the purpose of them to receive the Holy Spirit, so that they might let the sins of others slip through their fingers like sand. That the sins of others might just simply drift away. And again, in the Greek, not the English, Jesus says to his followers, "If you do that those sins will not rule you." We hear it as "retain" but a better translation is "rule". The sins of another will not rule you. Jesus shows up and the first thing that he says to his followers is, "Peace and you need to let the hurts and pains that people cause to you to slip through your fingers like grains of sand, because if you don't those things will rule your life."

I've always thought about forgiveness as something that I, as the hurt party, bestow on other people who have caused me harm. I need to forgive them so that they might be set free. I need to forgive them so that they will be okay. I need to forgive them in order to somehow gift them with something. But what Jesus is telling us is that it's different than that. When we forgive others we are, in fact, freeing ourselves. The hurt that we carry within, the righteous indignation, all of the things that get us upset and twisted and frustrated, all of those things that we allow other people to do to us--when we let those go in forgiveness, their ability to rule and control our lives goes away and we are now free to be the people of God as God intended.

A third time, Jesus says, "Peace to you". This time he says it to Thomas, the doubter, who puts his finger in the holes in Jesus' hands, he puts his hand in his side and says, "Okay, my Lord, my God, I get it now." And Jesus says, "You believe because you have seen. What about those who never see and who yet have come to trust that I am the risen one?" What about those who can no longer see Jesus? How do they get to understand that Christ's loving presence is at work in their lives for them? Again I go back to the Disaster Response work of our denomination. As a congregation that has benefitted from this ministry, I can tell you that what mattered most when we needed it was that PDA showed up. They came in our hour of need, and in that presence reminded us that we were loved and cared for and connected, that we were not alone. I have no recollection of one word that was said that weekend by any volunteer from PDA. But I can remember those blue shirts and their presence. This is how we come to know the presence of Christ in our lives now. Because faithful followers who are unsure of saying exactly the right thing have the courage to show up in our lives and by showing up they offer the peace and presence of Jesus Christ.

A week ago Wednesday, the Wednesday of Holy Week, before Easter, I received an email message that went out through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance about two volunteers that were being deployed to a congregation in New Jersey. On the Tuesday of Holy Week, their sanctuary burned to the ground and on Wednesday this denomination sent two people to be with them. I thought about what it would be like to be on that plane flying to New Jersey on Holy Week to encounter an entire congregation, stunned and hurting because their beloved sanctuary had burned to the ground. I imagined the questions that they were asking. Who did this? Was it arson? Was it an accident? Was it an electric--lightning storm? Why did God let this happen now on Holy Week? Does God not care about us? Does God not love us? Is God not watching out for us? What have we done wrong? What mistakes have we made? Why is God making us pay this price? On and on and on the questions go. But I can tell you that the people that showed up on our behalf wearing those blue shirts that say "Out of Chaos Hope" didn't have any answers to those questions. They simply showed up and hugged and cried and prayed and said "I love you. I am with you. Peace to you."

The first words that Jesus says to his frightened disciples are "Peace to you." Maybe that's a good example of witness for us to trust, that the first words that we need to say whenever we show up in a friend or family member's life when things are going crazy is simply, "Peace to you." I stand before you as someone who has felt that ministry and I can tell you sometimes a hug is simply enough. Amen.