

# Second Sunday of Easter

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## Introduction

It's difficult to predict the impact on the body of violence experienced or witnessed. Perhaps over the centuries of interpretation we have not given enough attention to the trauma that the disciples had witnessed in the final days of Jesus life, but also the despair at their own failures and perceived weaknesses as they deserted him. So when we find them locked into a room for fear of the outside world we should take note of the horror of their recent experience. But nor should we miss the power, and the symbolism, of Jesus entering that locked in state and declaring peace.

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## Text

### John 20:19-31

#### Jesus Appears to the Disciples

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 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.'

#### Jesus and Thomas

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.'

#### The Purpose of This Book

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.

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## Comment

There is much to consider in just the first two verses of our reading today.

“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders,”

First there is the symbolism of the evening. The day has gone, the darkness is creeping. Nature itself is in sympathy with these disciples who had seen all their plans and hopes dashed with the death of their leader. It was night, not just in the streets of Jerusalem, but in the hearts of each one in that sealed room.

And that’s the second thing. They were locked in. I think there’s something symbolic here too. Witnessing violence, or having violence inflicted, can have that effect. It can lock a person into their trauma. The disciples here were bolted inside that room, but locked in also to the trauma they had seen and experienced.

Tragically, many of us will have known this effect. We have witnessed violence acted out in front of us, or we have experienced violence, physically, emotionally or psychologically. Aggression and abuse can deprive us of a voice, can turn us in on ourselves and away from the rest of the world.

These days we may have written about these people suffering from PTSD, the physical or psychological impact of being in a perceived life or death situation, or of being surrounded by violence. It can bring on anxiety or stress, fearful feelings, hallucinations, nightmares, flashbacks and panic attacks. Some experience selective mutism, where they just can’t communicate. For some they avoid life, become agoraphobic, or listless, or simply an inability to communicate. Was this in the experience of the disciples just days after the crucifixion?

And thirdly, there is the source of their fear. The Jewish leaders. This is a difficult thing to consider, yet it is a common theme within John’s gospel. Time and again he speaks about peoples’ actions or words being constrained for fear of the Jews. There may be some factual, or historical accuracy in the account for the people who did these things happened to be Jewish, but within days, the movement that began here in this locked-in state moved out of that room and confidently began to proclaim their message. Within 400 years it was the official religion of the Empire. 1,000 years later it spanned the globe.

It was, and is, no longer a minority movement in many parts of the world. In many places we are the reigning powers.

How easily then over the course of this history, did the factual statements of John’s Gospel become the permissive cause for anti-Semitism. This statement here in John’s Gospel, describing the actual fear experienced by those first disciples, became a generalised prejudice against a whole people group. It perhaps reached it’s lowest and most shameful point in the Holocaust, but it still has the power to commandeer the headlines.

How frequently do we see it that those who have been traumatised transfer their trauma onto another group whom they demonise and ultimately subject to the same violence and trauma that they themselves had experienced.

This is an endless, violent cycle of revenge and retribution. Perpetrated from the locked room of our pain and anguish.

But the verse doesn’t end there. It says, “Jesus came and stood among them and said “Peace be with you!””

The Risen Christ, so recently the victim of scapegoating violence comes and stands in the midst of the locked-in room and offers a new way out of the destructive cycle of revenge and retribution. “Peace be with you!”

That’s what they needed to hear, locked in to their pain and their trauma. It is the blessing he offers in the noise and tumult of their torment. Peace!

And this was no easy peace. It was no PollyAnna-ish view which refuses to look at the harsh reality of a violent world. For Jesus shows them the scars on his hands and his side. This is not make believe, this is peace in the context of real suffering and violence. Jesus still carries his scars and yet offers peace. The magnitude of this should not be underestimated.

Last Wednesday, 4th April, was the 50th Anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the great apostle of non-violence. He once said, "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

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## Response

Take some time to research a conflict zone in the world which you know little about. Learn something of the history of the conflict, the types of violence and the experiences of people there. What do people say about their world? What do journalists, experts and politicians say about it? What signs of trauma are present? Where are the risks of cyclical violence?

Now imagine what it would mean for Jesus to enter that scene and declare peace.

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## Prayer

Strong God,  
Who knows what it is to be a victim,  
You step into the locked-in places  
of our world  
and our lives  
and declare Peace.

You do so as someone who has known trauma  
and bears the scars.

Forgive us for each occasion  
when we have struck out in our pain  
and created new victims  
alongside ourselves.

Teach us how to carry our scars  
Strengthen us to be receptive to your Spirit  
Free us from the destructive cycle of violence  
For our own sake  
For our community's sake  
and for Jesus sake,  
who was an innocent victim

Amen

