

Second Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

The resurrection scenes of the gospel account aren't always in an order that makes sequential sense. In this scene we see Jesus among his frightened disciples and there is a distinction between their responses to their circumstances and Jesus' responses to the circumstances.

Phrases such as "You can't always control your circumstances, you can control your responses to your circumstances" can seem too easy to be consistently true. However, there may something at the heart of this week's reading that speaks of how an inner life can nurture and sustain us through times of unpredictability.

Text

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."

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.

Comment

This is such an extraordinary passage. The disciples are gathered in a room with locked doors, and they are frightened of “The Jews”. This category in the fourth Gospel “The Jews” has caused much speculation among scholars – some arguing about an increasing anti semitism that may be read into John’s gospel and others disagreeing.

Simply on a surface level — sometimes a helpful thing to consider — the disciples were Jews themselves. So they are in a locked place because they are frightened. It is also after the resurrection stories have begun to emerge. Why are they frightened? It is less to be frightened about the death of Jesus, because the rumour is that the death has been overcome. They are frightened about something else – perhaps they are frightened that their abandonment of Jesus during his torture and death will result in their need to be frightened of Jesus, and their own selves, and everything.

And then the text says that Jesus was among them. Locked doors are — presumably — still locked, but Jesus is there. He says “Peace be with you” to them.

In reading this, we can recognise that the genre of biblical literature normalises linguistic functions for us that would seem unordinary in everyday life. “Hark!” “Hail!” “Do not fear!” are things we hear, as well as “Peace be with you!” What is helpful to remember is that, in the original Hebrew and Aramaic of the time, that the Greek text of John may be trying to describe, “peace be with you” was “Shalom” which is a greeting. A beautiful and heart-felt greeting, but a simple greeting nonetheless.

So we have Jesus in the upper room where the disciples are frightened about God Knows What and the first thing he says to them is “Hello” or “Howdy” or whatever it is that we say. As the first words to the disciples, it is a parochial and penetrating word. He is saying hello to them face to face, and also saying hello to their fear, their projection, the ones that they are blaming, their own blame mechanisms.

It is in this complicated place of connection that the reciprocity of mission is shared. “As the father has sent me, so I ...” The disciples are at the heart of their fear and their failure and in this space, locked away, frightened of themselves and others, their vocation is given. This seems to demonstrate something of the gospel understanding of success and power – it is by engaging in moments of failure, rather than being perfect and shiny, that incarnation continues.

Response

To think of the disciples in a place of fear and then the incarnate one, as René Girard calls him “the one who is living and dead”, among them, using a greeting as simple and ordinary as “Hello” is a powerful reflection. What is it that keeps us locked in rooms of fear? How can we find a way to allow this resurrection voice come to greet us in places that are projecting fear and unease both outward and inward?

What is it that we need to say hello to in our daily practice of prayer and action?

Hello to fear.
Hello to prejudice.
Hello to pain.
Hello to joy.
Hello to endings.
Hello to the unexpected moment.
Hello to surprise.
Hello to disappointment.
Hello to grief.
Hello to love.

As we think of the life of Jesus, we can imagine that he may have been a person with a practice of being open to the unexpected moment. When hostility, or courage, or secrecy or desperation found their way to him, we read that he responded to the moment. An observant man, with eyes open to the world around him, we may find our practice of faith deepened by asking to attend to our lives with the presence he attended to his.

Some questions to reflect on:

How do you read the line “For fear of the Jews?” In what way were the disciples afraid of those “out there” and also themselves?

What was it that a locked room provided for the disciples?

If you could have a conversation with one character in this text, who would it be? What would you ask? What would they ask you?

Prayer

God without fear,
You who call us, again and again, to live without fear,
We confess that we do fear, and when we do,
We hide in rooms.
Be among us. Open our fearful hearts to what is there.
Because you are always with us.
Amen.