

Finding the Light

For the next several weeks we will again be on a journey because unlike the world outside the body of Christ we will remain in the Easter Season for seven more weeks. We are Easter people, so Easter is not just a one day event for us, but the representation of a transformation of the world which happened then and forever opened the possibility for an alternative way of being. During this season, we pause and contemplate those changes as we also await the day of Pentecost described in Luke's sequel to the gospel account of Jesus' life which in that narrative marked the arrival of the Holy Spirit to totally alter the lives of the disciples. This morning we have before us three texts from three very different time points of that journey for the first believers; each of which has some message still relevant for us today. The gospel passage from John would be chronologically the first to be considered as it describes an event which occurred in their lives on that same day the tomb was discovered to be empty. Last week we read from John's gospel account about the discovery of the empty tomb; of how distressed Mary Magdalene was, of her first assumption and how she ran to report it to the disciples and their lack of understanding. This is followed by her encounter with the risen Christ and her joyful carrying of his message to the gathered disciples: "I have seen the Lord!" Today's passage begins: "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." Jesus' greeting would have been the word "Shalom", which is a wonderful expression which as a greeting is a wish for wholeness for the person being greeted...wholeness of mind, body and spirit...certainly a needed greeting to be spoken into a room full of those gathered in fear and grief as his disciples certainly were. Jesus then shows the disciples his hands and his side...the wounds he received during his crucifixion. At this point, John's narrative tells us "then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." Although our passage for today stops at verse 23, most of us are very familiar with the narrative which follows in verses 24 through 31 which informs us that there was one disciple not present on that first evening. No reason is given for this absence, which is obviously temporary because he returns shortly. What is interesting is what happens when this disciple, Thomas the Twin, returns and is told of Jesus' appearance among them. The disciples who have witnessed Jesus' appearance among them tell Thomas: "We have seen the Lord." Does that phrase sound familiar? It sounds very much like what Mary Magdalene told them earlier in the day, doesn't it? That news she brought to them but which they did not believe. Yet, when Thomas responds: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my fingers in his side, I will not believe." Later generations have forever used this response to define his character as one who demands proof before belief as something to be judged harshly. Thomas is only saying he needs to see what they have seen. In the later verses, when Thomas gets his chance to see his Lord and is invited to do as he said he needed, instead when invited to touch, responded, "My Lord and my God!" In those first days and weeks, John's gospels describes Jesus still moving among his disciples, concerned to assure and lead them and to put them to work on the mission for which he had gathered them. In John's gospel, it is in these appearances and interactions that Jesus breathes on them and they receive the Holy Spirit along with instructions: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." This is a much quieter

gifting of the Spirit that is described by Luke which occurs after the Ascension. In this account of the giving of the Holy Spirit, there is another difference besides context. The wounds of the crucifixion are still very present, and Jesus brings up the need for forgiveness of sins. In fact, in this passage, Jesus explicitly directs the disciples' attention to the wounds he has received when crucified when he first appears among them. Verse 20: "He showed them his hands and his side." These wounds are not erased by the resurrection. Sometimes we have a difficult time dealing with this aspect of the reality of life—that the scars and wounds of life remain with us even when we are redeemed. Sometimes it seems that we have the notion that salvation moves in a linear fashion from brokenness toward victory over death, evil and suffering, and we want to gloss over or ignore the way the trauma of death, or brokenness continues or "remains" in the midst of life. Much like we prefer to go directly from Palm Sunday to Easter's Dawning. This type of traditional understanding of redemption often advises people to "get over it" or "move on", but those who have suffered trauma often find such counsel unhelpful. How is it possible to "move on" when wounds remain? It has been suggested that it could be possible to re-envision the meaning of resurrection by locating its power in confronting, attending to and mindfully transforming wounds. This suggestion is offered by Shelly Rambo, a theologian who studies trauma. In that re-envisioning, the power of the resurrection is used to shine light into the wounds of our society, to confront the guilt and to enter into a process of reconciliation and healing. This type of re-envisioning then makes the connection to the injunction given after the imparting of the Holy Spirit that "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." a reasonable one. Within the prayer given to his disciples, the act of forgiving as we forgive was included. Forgiveness was an integral part of Jesus' teachings and ministry. In our current context, we have an abundance of wounds in need of attention. There are a staggering number of people who have lost loved ones to the deadly pandemic who are engulfed by grief which is compounded by the pain of separation and isolation also experienced. Additionally, the pandemic has revealed deep racial wounds in the fabric of our society, as well as the ever-widening socioeconomic gap between those who have and those who do not. Think also of the recurring trauma of mass shootings, some the result of racialized or gender violence, that continue to divide and terrorize our nation. Facing these wounds is essential if we are to be an Easter people who engage, rather than ignore, the death-tending realities of our world and bear witness to resurrection life. If deep pain, fear and anger resulting from wounds is not acknowledged and faced, it only festers and becomes worse; it can become hatred of self or others. Places of faith can be places where these and other wounds are touched, attended to, released, liberated and redeemed. Places where anger, fear, agitation, grief and loss can be acknowledged and addressed, where anger can be transformed into compassion for those who are hurting when understanding shines light on the wounds. Places where fear is transformed into interconnection that enables us to see where one is wounded, all are wounded because we are all one body; that injustice to one is injustice to all. Grief and loss can forge communities of care and tenderness, compassion and courage. And that is basically what is described in the passage from Acts 4:32-35. "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." The community gathered and worked to ensure that all needs of those in the community were met.

This last point was the guiding principle...that all needs of those in the community were met. Sounds very idyllic, impossible to our ears...When the early communities of believers were formed, they had a clear idea of their purpose: it was to establish a certain way of life which would set them apart from the rest of the world. In the passage from 1st John there is a concise statement of that way of life: what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—“this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” That was the goal...to have fellowship with God—Father and Son. To have this fellowship, because God is light and in him there is no darkness, to have fellowship, then those walking must also walk in the light. Verse 7: “But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son, cleanses us from all sin.” Somehow as the centuries have passed we have lost sight of that goal; we have become less concerned about the relationship and fellowship we have with God and all God’s children here and now, somehow thinking that phrase Jesus gave us about desiring God’s reign to be present here was not important when its location near the beginning of that prayer should tell us otherwise....As we spend some time thinking about the encounters recorded that Jesus has with his disciples before the ascension, let us consider what it means to be finding and walking in the light. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.