

Sermon for April 21, 2019

“Receive the Holy Spirit”

John 20:1-18, 19-29

Staunton Church of the Brethren

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Why do people visit cemeteries? What is it we expect to find? Some come armed with gardening gloves and trowels, ready to plant something, or do some weeding. Others carry little gifts we plan to leave behind: mementos of a cherished relationship, or plastic flowers or wreaths. We're sometimes a bit self-conscious to be seen putting these items down. We can feel vaguely embarrassed by the sentimentality, as well as wonder how long they will be there.

When Jews visit the graves of loved ones, they might leave a stone behind, until the stones pile up: a tangible tally of the community's caring. When the Japanese do so, they bring the whole family with them, and go through the ancient ritual of a tea ceremony, in the presence of their ancestors. Others simply wander over to the grave and sit a spell: watching, waiting, remembering, even talking openly ... reading the names on the gravestones ... and if it's a family plot, maybe imagining our own place in the stone-carved genealogy of the headstones. When we leave, we somehow feel closer to the dear departed: more at peace.

Why is it that Mary Magdalene visited Jesus' tomb? Unlike in Matthew and Luke's gospels, John isn't saying. Those other gospel-writers would have us believe she went to embalm the body. In John's version of the story, the embalming had already been completed. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea performed that task the day before. But Mary was there, early, even before sunrise. I imagine that she couldn't sleep. Everything that had happened was so shocking, and it had happened so fast. A week ago there was a parade with hails of "Hosanna." Then the Passover festival, and Jesus had eaten with his disciples. But later that night he was arrested, identified, betrayed, by one of his own; and even denied by his right hand man. He was dragged before Pilate and Herod and Pilate again; whipped, mocked, and reluctantly condemned to death by crucifixion. He carried his own cross through the narrow

streets of Jerusalem until he could stand no longer, and then a Passover pilgrim was pulled out of the crowd to carry it for him the rest of the way. Jesus was nailed to the crossbeams and hung up to die an excruciating death by asphyxiation, during which time the skies darkened, and the wind blew so strong that the temple curtain was torn in two. Before the day was over, his dead body was taken down, and given to Joseph of Arimathea, who offered his own tomb for burial. That was Friday night, the beginning of the Sabbath. So Sunday morning was the end of Sabbath, when sleepless Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, only to see that the sealing stone had been moved.

Why do people visit cemeteries? Not to find what Mary found. John doesn't say that Mary looked inside. It just says that she ran to tell Peter and the others that his body was gone. Of course they ran to the tomb to find out what was going on, and they discovered his body wrappings, but no body. John says that one of the disciples "saw and believed," but they still didn't really know what to believe. They all left, I'm sure in a quandary, but Mary stayed, weeping.

When Mary finally got up the courage to look into the tomb, she saw two angels sitting there, and when she turned around again she saw Jesus standing outside the tomb, but she didn't know him at first. "Woman, why are you weeping?" Oh my goodness, it's Jesus. Now she knew. And she followed his instructions to go and tell his followers "I have seen the Lord."

Later that day, the disciples were still huddling in their safe-house, doors locked. What will happen now? If Jesus is raised, will that make life even harder for them. They only have Mary's word for anything so far. And that's when Jesus came right through the walls, the locked doors, whatever. "Peace be with you." And he showed them his hands and side, and the disciples came alive again. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit."

There it was. He gave them his peace, he commissioned them for service, and he empowered them for it. His peace was shalom, but this was a wholeness, a fullness, a salvation that they had not received before now. Peace is why Jesus came. Peace that comes from

forgiveness of our sins, mercy and grace. Peace that fills us with love above all else for God and for others. Peace that carries faithfulness and righteousness and justice with it for the whole world. “Peace I give you, not as the world gives.” This was a gift, but one to be shared – their mission. But how? Through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus had told them that he would send the Spirit, the Advocate. “When the Advocate comes, whom I am sending to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have seen me from the beginning.” (John 15:26-27) This is John’s Pentecost moment. Luke tells us of the Pentecost festival where the Spirit came to them again as tongues of fire, but this is their first empowering. Maybe it’s that we humans just have a hard time trusting the first time? But Jesus is here passing on his mission to the church, and giving them the power to do it. And power it is. Psalm 33:6 reminds us “By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all the hosts.” There is power in the breath of God, the wind, the Spirit. It empowers, it changes, it leads, and it enables God’s people for their calling.

If the story ended right there, it would have been enough. But one of the disciples was not in the room when all this was happening. Thomas was not there. We don’t know why. Up till then he was strong. He didn’t deny or betray, though he did run away with the rest of them. Maybe he was out getting some food. Maybe he was just clearing his head. Maybe he thought it was over and he was making plans for what he would do now. A lot of things run through our heads when we lose a loved one. Ah, but this gave the other disciples a chance to try out their new powers, their new mission, filled with the Holy Spirit. Let’s tell Thomas the good news!

“Thomas, we have seen the Lord.” Can you imagine their excitement at being able to tell Thomas the story? This was easy. Thomas would understand right away. He was one of them. They trusted each other. I can hear them all telling him with joy in their hearts. “We have seen the Lord.” But Thomas’ reaction was not what they expected. “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.” Did he really want to do those things? Was he imagining a ghost that

he could just poke his fingers through? Or was he just saying, this is too impossible to believe, it's too good to be true. You had your moment, unless I have mine, it can't be true. You're all crazy. He was not believing without seeing.

I am glad this story is told. It reminds us that no matter how excited we are about our faith, no matter how eager we are to share it with a friend, some will find it hard to believe until they have their own spiritual experience. It might come when we invite them to worship or to a study or just reach out and befriend them, but we all need our own experience. I will not believe based on your experience, but on mine. The only thing we can do is to try to help people get in the right place for that experience to happen.

Obviously, the disciples in their eagerness did not scare Thomas away, because a week later they were all together, including Thomas this time, and Jesus came again, through the walls. The doors were shut. "Peace be with you." And Jesus knew about Thomas' doubts. "Go ahead Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands...put your hand in my side...do not doubt, only believe." At that moment, there was no poking necessary. "My Lord and my God!" is all he could say. And Jesus then offered the blessing that reaches even to us and beyond, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

And when we have our experience, when the breath of God comes to us in the Holy Spirit, we, too are witnesses, not just to Easter morning, but to the peace that Jesus gives us, a peace and breath that changes our lives.

Do you remember the old TV sitcom, "Home Improvement"? In those shows, Tim, one of the lead characters, would often be given advice from Wilson, his neighbor across the fence in the backyard. Often, but not always, this advice was unsolicited. But in one of the episodes, it was Tim who gave Wilson some advice. Wilson was feeling down and spoke about wanting to move back to the place he first met his deceased wife, because his memories of her were beginning to fade. In a somewhat unusual twist, Tim told Wilson about hearing a retired race car driver say, "You don't need an ignition switch to keep the memories alive; just a pit crew." So think of it this way. We're Jesus' pit crew now, and we, along with all the other

believers, starting with the disciples, are challenged with keeping his memory alive. And more than that, allowing the breath of God to live in us and empower us to share the peace of Christ with everyone we meet.

The glory of God that was in Jesus Christ is now in us, by the very breath of God. He lives. Amen.