

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter – April 15, 2018
Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
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We are all called to be witnesses! Start practicing...

On April 9, the Vatican Dispatch announced Pope Francis' recently written 104 page document, "Gaudete et Exsultate", (Rejoice and Be Glad). In it, Pope Francis reminds Christians, and indeed, all people of faith, that "The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence." Pope Francis says his "modest goal" is to "... re-propose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities." He reminds believers that "the Lord has chosen each one of us to be holy and blameless before him in love... ."

Like our own Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, Pope Francis emphasized that the following of Christ, the path to holiness, is a "way of life" not an intellectual exercise. Bishop Curry's challenge to us "to follow in the WAY of Jesus" means that we seek to live the Gospel. And like St. Francis himself said, preach the Gospel, and only if necessary, use words."

Pope Francis insists that "each believer discerns his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts, rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. "We are called to be witnesses, he writes, "but there are many actual ways of bearing witness."

My friends, what timing for this remarkable message as we hear proclaimed on this third Sunday of Easter, Jesus' own words of blessing, challenge, and opportunity. "Peace be with you.", Jesus says first as he appears to those still fearful and mournful disciples. It's night in the gospel we just heard, the night of Easter day. It has been a very long day for the disciples. In fact the day, as it always does, began before dawn with that event that is not an event but is the beginning of the rest of history that no one saw. God worked it in secret, although Jesus himself gave glimpses of it in his teaching on the way to Jerusalem. We call it resurrection and when we encounter the disciples in the gospel we heard this morning, they are still trying to take it in and maybe on this third Sunday of Easter, like them, we are still trying to take it in as well. Perhaps "taking it all in" is the work of our lifetime of faith in Jesus Christ.

What does resurrection mean? His, ours, the world's? What does it look like? What would it mean for us not only to believe in the resurrection (as in Credo, to give our heart to the resurrection) but also to practice resurrection in our daily lives?

We are so hard on these slow to get it disciples, aren't we? Perhaps that comes from our own instinct to be so hard on ourselves and therefore, so very hard on others. Think what they have just been through. It's only two days after Jesus' death. If your best friend, someone on whom you had pinned all your hopes had died on Friday, would you be here this morning singing words of rejoicing with an unshakable faith that life was going on for your friend? Would you have gotten in and gotten out into that dangerous and violent world proclaiming another way to live? If you think you would have had faith that strong, perhaps Robert and I would do well to leave the preaching and teaching to you! But if you are like me, or we, like those hapless, helpless first disciples, the profound sense of loss and dread would be all I would be able to feel. I, too, in all honesty, would be paralyzed by the enormity of it all.

Enter, Jesus. "Peace be with you." A simple and profound greeting to stunned friends still in hiding. Jesus knew their hearts. Jesus knew their fears. Jesus knew their broken spirits. And what Jesus knew most of all was that they needed his peace be upon them. Such an intimate, loving, and compassionate scene we witness this morning. "Peace be with you." Do you need to hear these words this morning from Jesus? I certainly do. In another week of toxic gassings and deadly bombings, in a week of more gun violence, road rage, and hateful rhetoric, I need to hear Jesus say to me, to all of us, "Peace be with you." Into the midst of the hard fact that life includes suffering and loss, confusion, despair, comes the One they (and us) least expect. They'd heard word that Jesus was raised from the dead, but as Luke says right before the gospel text we heard this morning, it had been brought to them by women and they thought it to be an "idle tale," so like women to spin a tale!

Perhaps we are so hard on these disciples because we, too, can be so cynical when it comes to signs of hope, so often giving ourselves over to despair and anxiety. That's certainly what the world would have us do. It is certainly the power of injustice and inequality when those in power use fear and despair to divide, control, and oppress others, over and against each other. We see that all the time. We hear it all the time. And perhaps, God forgive us, we may, at times, be complicit in it.

But Jesus shows up anyway. He didn't wait for them to believe. He stood in their midst, in the midst of their fear and unbelief, in the midst of their despair, just as He stands with us. It's so simple, isn't it? He stands with them and He stands with us. Nothing flashy. No long diatribe. Just exactly what they needed and what we need as well- someone simply to come alongside, to stand with us, not to try to talk us out of what we are feeling or to straighten out how we are thinking... someone who loves us enough to simply to be with us in that very place of our own deep woundedness. And as Jesus stands with us, we notice his own woundedness. This Jesus knows about loss, betrayal, and pain. His own body bears the signs of all of it.

What is most interesting here, I believe, is that the Greek verb for "stand" is the root for the verb, "resurrect." All resurrect as a verb means in Greek is "to stand up again." That's it.

Jesus stands up again when even his closest friends and followers least expect it. He stood up again in the face of death, in victory over what the powerbrokers thought was the worst and final end for him. Jesus stands up again and this time, it *his* final victory over the worst they could do to him. His victory over death.

As Jesus stands in their midst as he does for us, he offers gentle, compassionate hope to the bereft. He does not berate them. He stands with them and bestows upon them his gift of peace. "Peace be with you."

"Peace be with you." Again, such a simple word, it seems. But the Hebrew word for peace is so different from the English word for peace. When you hear peace, if you are like me, the first thing you think may be, "Ahh, a cessation of conflict, rest, relaxation." But that's not what the Hebrew word, "Shalom" really means. Shalom means a "healing into wholeness." *A healing into wholeness.* In other words it's a word that invites you and me into a journey, a process of becoming whole, holy, remembered. Jesus, stands up again in the face of death and on our behalf, invites us to stand up, too.

I love the next movement in this Gospel having grown up in a restaurant family with a Dad who was "all things hospitality." Jesus says one more thing that may seem very odd, "Have you anything to eat?" It reminds me of my growing up and as I recall, hardly being in the car for an hour or so, and asking my parents, "When are we going to eat?" Truth is, being around a table, yes, even this Eucharistic table where we are fed together, healed together, made whole and holy together, is why we come here, time and time again. Jesus stands with us, even still.

And there is one more very significant invitation here. As Jesus feeds us, as He shows up, stands with and makes the journey with us, He invites us to do the same for others. It is not sufficient to be fed and to walk away. It is not sufficient to be fed and then utter a "thank you" on the way out. Jesus says, we are to be witnesses to his resurrection. We are to stand up, come alongside, and do the feeding for others as He has done for us. That's what the resurrection is all about. He invites us to practice resurrection, to spread resurrection, to live resurrection.

Pope Francis is reminding Roman Catholics, Christians of all stripes, people of every tradition and no tradition, to recognize that each of us, by virtue of our humanity are called to bear witness to resurrection life. Abundant life meant for each and every human being and all creation. Now that can feel hopelessly impossible. But what if you and I took one day at a time, one hour at a time, one moment at a time, and decided what the best most loving use of our life offers us in that one moment? Who has need of us in a simple sort of "stand up, come alongside" kind of way? Who needs us to say, "Peace be with you."? Who needs us simply to show up for them? And in so doing, spread resurrection?

Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things." These simple yet profound ways of practicing and spreading resurrection is all He is asking of us.

So, my friends, how will you stand up, show up and practice spreading resurrection accepting Jesus' commissioning to be his witnesses in such a desperate world.

"Peace be with you." Now start practicing...

Amen.