

Turtle with a Moustache

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on April 24, 2022

based on John 20:19-31

In this morning's reading, the disciples of Jesus find themselves surrounded by hostiles. It's Easter evening, but they don't know it. They are locked into their upper room, the rented space where they had taken the last supper. They are hoping for the whole "Jesus thing" will blow over before the authorities round them up and execute them like they did their leader.

Then, mysteriously, into their midst comes Jesus and he says "Peace be with you." In fact, Jesus says it three times in the course of their short visit. If he had said it just once it would have simply been a greeting like, "Hello" But he says it to them three times.

It must be important. Here at the end of the gospel, we would expect Jesus to give his disciples his courage, perhaps his strength, even his faith. But no, he chooses to give them his peace. Peace -- what is it?

Someone has said that the opposite of fear is not courage; it is peace. I mean, look, courage is just fear that has said a prayer and decided, still full of fear, to meet what it is afraid of, face-to-face.

Peace is different. Peace behaves as if what one should be afraid of has no real power. And, you know, without that kind of peace it's hard not to just react to your fear. It takes pretending things will be okay. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but it's worth trying to put on that mindset when the world has suddenly changed like it did for the disciples and you don't know how to navigate it. Let me tell you a personal story about that.

Five-and-a-half years ago Donald Trump was elected president and honestly, let me confess, it threw me into a dark place, the kind you find yourself in when something you never imagined comes to be. As a pastor I knew I was going to have to deal in sermons for at least four years with whatever came down from him and it was not a happy thought.

So, anyway, Friday of election week comes and I'm doing normal stuff because

doing normal stuff when you're panicking can make you feel kind of normal. In fact, I was in Costco in Salt Lake City where I lived then, and I was getting something at the pharmacy section and there right in front of me was Utah's Senator, Orin Hatch (who died yesterday). Here's the man third in line of succession to the presidency after the VP and the Speaker of the House. He was buying something for a cold. He was standing there, alone, waiting for his Flonase and I saw a clear opening and grabbed it.

In fact, I grabbed his elbow and told him I hoped he would do his best to rein in our new president if he ever needed it. Senator Hatch was very gracious and acknowledged the reason for my comment, but expressed some optimism that he wouldn't have to. He said, "Donald has learned a lot in the last 2 months."

We chatted a long while, Senator Hatch couldn't have been nicer. He asked me what I did. I told him I was a pastor at Wasatch Presbyterian in Salt Lake. He knew the church very well. One of his cousins lived right next door to the church, which I knew. Mormons, you know, have huge families so they have cousins everywhere.

Anyway, I told him I was a life-long Democrat and thanked him for teaming up with Senator Edward Kennedy to pass some really good legislation back in the 80s and 90s. I told him I hoped we might see that kind of partnership again someday. He said, "You know, Teddy never passed a bill until he teamed up with me."

The pharmacist returned with a Costco sized bundle of Flonase. The Senator, who'd grown up in poverty, balked a little when the pharmacist said the bundle would cost him \$39.00.

So, I told him I'd pay for it. I said that we had a Deacon's Fund at our church and we sometimes help people out with prescriptions, "drugs being so expensive," I said.

He gave me a long look to see if I was just playing him, then looked at the pharmacist who was waiting, and motioning to me said, "This is my pastor." Then he politely declined my offer. I doubt the family will call and ask me to

do his funeral, but at the time I was so glad I spoke to him. I needed to do something to steady myself and that was such a thing.

You know, you can't will yourself to have peace the way you can will yourself to have courage. The philosopher, Ajahn Chah has left us a delightful quote that says that, "Looking for peace is like looking for a turtle with a mustache: You won't be able to find it, but when your heart is ready, peace will come looking for you."

"My peace I leave you," said Jesus at the last supper, "my peace I give unto you; not as the world gives give I unto you." He had peace to visit upon these followers and it was like no peace they had ever experienced before.

"After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

In Book XIX of Homer's ODYSSEY, there is another story of woundedness that hinges on the subject of identity. The hero, Odysseus, has been gone from home for some twenty years: ten years fighting valiantly for the Greeks in the Trojan war, and ten more years wandering circuitously home. Upon his arrival neither his wife, Penelope, nor son Telemachus recognize him. Odysseus is glad of this He doesn't want to be recognized until he can devise a plan to dispose violently of the many strange men who want Penelope for a wife and who, though unwelcome, have made his home their own in his absence, hoping Penelope will decide Odysseus must be dead and marry one of them.

It is a wonderfully drawn story. Odysseus speaks at length with his dear wife. She is so taken with him. Ironically she notes that he is the same age as her dear lost husband, never imagining for a moment who it is she is talking to.

Afterward she offers him a magnanimous act of hospitality She asks Odysseus' ancient nurse maid, Eurycleia, to draw the stranger a bath and wash his feet. It is then that he is found out, for the old woman notices the unmistakable sign of his identity; a scar on one thigh he'd had since he was a little boy; a wound he had picked up in his first boar hunt."

Like Jesus' disciples she is about to rejoice out loud when Odysseus practically strangles her, grabbing her throat and mouth, and with threats and

endearments he tells her she must keep silence a while longer. The scar -- the unmistakable mark of identity, identified him. It is the same with Jesus. What does it mean?

In the first century there was a sect of Christianity that competed with what would become the mainstream faith. This sect was called Docetism. It taught that Jesus did not really die on the cross. He only seemed to suffer (the word, "Doceo" is greek for "seems, or appears").

John's gospel (the one we are looking at this morning) offers a corrective to this approach, insisting that even after the resurrection, Jesus carried on his person the scars of his execution at the hands of the Romans.

The Doubting Thomas story italicizes this belief, as well, because Thomas is the disciple who insists on seeing the scars as proof: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in those holes and my hand in his side, I will not believe," he says.

For many centuries the church has taken to glibly judging Thomas for his doubts, but they are an important part of the gospel and are certainly central to the thorough-going rational development of Christian thought -- much to our benefit, too.

Do you remember a cult in the late 90s called The Heaven's Gate Community? They were waiting to rendezvous with the comet, Hale-Bopp when it passed through our solar system in 1997. Thirty-nine of them committed mass suicide, remember, because that was how they believed they were going to be transported to the comet. One female member, in her farewell video meant to be seen by her family after her transport, said that for her, "doubt was never an issue."

You know, maybe it should have been.

It seems to me that faith with no doubt isn't faith at all; it's merely mindless allegiance. Frederick Bueckner, probably the most oft-quoted Presbyterian minister around, once said: "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. It keeps it alive and moving."

The disciples saw Jesus' hands and feet and the mark in his side and they rejoiced. They knew who he was. All the pieces: messiah, persecution, cross, finally began to fit together for them. The wounded Jesus is the real deal.

As with our recent class in Asian Religions, I have, many times, taught classes on the world's enduring religious traditions, and I have seen a uniqueness about Christianity that has to do with this whole business of woundedness. It is in the meaning Christians have always imputed to suffering. It is so often out of woundedness that Christians have found not only their empathy but their sense of call. I think of Mother Teresa, but I also think of dozens of other unknown saints.

I know the story of a woman from North Carolina who was bragging in a most curious way over her 10 year old son; not over his exploits on the baseball field or prowess in the classroom either. No. Here is their story told in her own words ...

"[We] nearly lost him during the first six weeks of his life," she said. "They had him at

Duke University Hospital putting the oxygen to him as he hung between life and death. I prayed to God the whole time. I told God that, if he lived, I would dedicate him to God. He's got a scar to this day on his heel where they fed him those six weeks in the hospital. Right on his heel. I look upon that scar as God's mark. When he was a little boy I would point to that scar and say, "See, that. It's a sign that God's got plans for you."

And here's a sidebar to scars and woundedness. It comes from something my 33 year old daughter (who is still being treated for breast cancer) told her 4 year old recently. I will use my daughter's words.

Astrid (the 4 year old) asked me about a place I'd patched with a visible mending technique on my favorite skirt. She asked why I didn't fix it right. I explained that, sometimes when a thing has been broken and repaired, it can be even more beautiful than it was before. That it shows a thing has a story, a life and purpose and it's worth repairing.

She said no, broken things can't be beautiful. I lifted my shirt and pointed to my scars and said that, I had been broken there and put back together. The scars

show that I am strong because I am still here, taking care of my amazing kids, and that I am still beautiful even though I have been broken. Sometimes the beauty is in the story.

Okay; back to the morning's text. Jesus did not merely come to bring the disciples his peace, he came to commission them. He had plans for these men and women who had followed him so long.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.

Could the disciples forgive sins? Not as if they were gods. No. But they could tell the story of a God who loves all who God creates with a never ending love.

And who better to do that than these flawed human specimens. They had, each of them, abandoned Jesus at his arrest. The integrity and power of the forgiveness they could offer came precisely from the fact that they all had betrayed him.

Like Jesus, they were wounded healers. They would offer people the same thing Jesus gave them: Peace; a peace that passed all understanding.

Frederick Bueckner once wrote about a novel about a wounded healer and the nature of forgiveness, It's in his first book, a novel called, *The Final Beast*.

It is the story of a young, single, widowed minister. A man who is very lonely, in a very stressful placement. A woman in the town, sensing his loneliness, comes to him for counsel.

She's married but she's carrying on a relationship with someone who is not her husband. She wants to go back to her marriage again but there's all the awful guilt and shame she and her husband both feel. She's really not at all sure what she wants, and here's this attractive, lonely minister.

She leaves town in desperation one day and goes to a neighboring town, where she rents a hotel room. She leaves a message behind for the minister, telling him two things: no one but he knows where she is, and, "please don't come." Now, THERE is a mixed message if I ever heard one.

The minister feels himself in way over his head personally and professionally. He's afraid of what might happen if he goes to this woman, and also afraid of what might happen if he doesn't go. So, looking for direction, he goes to see a revealed old woman in his town, a woman known for her wisdom. He tells her everything. She advises him to go to the troubled young woman.

"And do what?" he asks.

"Give her what she really wants." she says.

"And what's that?" he wants to know.

"Give her the only thing you have to give her. Forgive her for Christ's sake."

"But she knows I forgive her," he says. The old woman shakes her head.

"Not you, GOD. Tell her that God forgives her.

That's the only power you have, to tell her that. Not just that God forgives her the poor little adultery, but the faces she can't bear to look at now. The [face of the man she had the affair with]. Her husband's. Her own, half the time. Tell her [God] forgives her for being lonely and bored, for not being full of joy with a house full of children. That's what sin really is, you know -- not being full of joy.

Tell her that her sin is forgiven because, whether she knows it or not, that's what she wants more than anything else -- what all of us want."

So, he goes to the woman at the hotel. And after they talk he moves to her and "with palms flat against her temples, he tipped her face to him, and raised her own hands and pressed them against his so that each seemed to be preventing the other's escape . . . he heard himself pronounce like a stranger: "The almighty and merciful God pardon and deliver you, forgive every face you cannot look upon with joy. . . ' and the burdens of her life, great and small, began to melt away."

And something else began to replace them: peace. Peace came and found her, now that she was ready to receive it. It was, of course, something more than merely the absence of conflict but the presence of a genuine manifestation of grace.

It was something Semitic peoples have always known as "Shalom." A peace with substance; a wholeness, an alrightness that comes from sensing God's abiding presence.

"Looking for peace is like looking for a turtle with a mustache: You won't be able to find it, but when your heart is ready, peace will come looking for you."

"My peace I leave you," said Jesus. "My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, give I to you."

There are things about Jesus that make him entirely unique in the annals of the earth. These things are not in his death.

I mean, look, thousands, maybe even millions of people have been martyred down the course of history. He wasn't alone. No, what I am talking about is the essential beauty of his person that comes through to us in the grace of his teachings.

His wisdom is as lovely as the lilies of the field, and as enduring as the pyramids. It offers us, not what we ask for, but what we find we really really long for in life.

Most of all, it offers us peace – peace with our past, and peace we can take with us into the future, no matter where we have to go.

Amen.