

Fearless Forgiveness

William Cwirla

John 20:19–31

Have you ever been afraid to go outside? So afraid that you find yourself hiding behind locked doors with the shades pulled and curtains drawn? So afraid you want to hide? Don't take phone calls. Don't answer the door. Don't engage the world.

One of the most remarkable reactions to the resurrection of Jesus is fear. In Mark, the women who went to the tomb early that Sunday morning and heard the news of the resurrection from the angel ran away in fear and told no one. In John, the disciples are hiding in the upper room, probably the same upper room where four days before Jesus had told them not to fear. The doors were locked tight. The disciples were cowering together in fear.

Is this any way to celebrate the resurrection? Where is the shout of victory? Christ is risen! Where is the celebration? He is risen, indeed! Instead the disciples are huddled together, locked up in fear.

When you stop to think about it, it makes sense. The rumors were already thick as fog. The tomb was empty. The guards were bribed and disappeared. Mary Magdalene has seen Him, touched Him. Every street corner was buzzing in whispered tones about how the tomb of Jesus was empty. His grave clothes mysteriously folded neatly. The religious authorities were probably conducting a frantic door to door search. They had crucified Jesus. They were aware of His predictions. They would stop at nothing to squelch this rumor now. And so the disciples were afraid. They circled their wagons, huddled together like frightened cats, and locked the doors.

Their fear is also understandable in that they knew that dead men don't ordinarily rise. Maybe they feared the worst, that the religious leaders or the Romans had taken the body of Jesus and were now going to come after them. Or maybe they didn't know what to think. What really is the appropriate response to the resurrection?

Jesus came and stood among them. He doesn't knock on the door or slip in through a window. He simply appears among them. He can do that. He's the Lord. He can be wherever He want,

whenever He wants. He isn't limited in any way, even though He's still very much a human, still flesh and blood, albeit risen from the dead, still the same Jesus the knew and loved. And now He is with them again.

"Peace be with you," He says to them, showing them the wounds on His hands and sides. Yup. That's Jesus all right. You can tell Him by His wounds. Don't accept any other. Those are the wounds by which you are healed. Those are the wounds that bring you peace. From His wounds come the peace that He speaks – peace with God and with each other. Their fear melts away. There is gladness and resurrection joy.

A second time Jesus says it. "Peace be with you." Why a second time, I wonder? Didn't the first one take? Or can you ever get tired of hearing it? The first peace was to clam their fears. The second peace was to prepare them for what they were going to do. Jesus was sending them. He was making them apostles, "sent ones," ones who were going to go with His authority to proclaim the kingdom and His forgiveness. They weren't going to be locked up forever. They were going to go to the ends of the earth. They were going to endure persecution and hardship and even the loss of their lives. And they were going with Jesus' peace and His victory over death.

Jesus is the apostle of the Father. The Father sent His Son to be the world's Savior, to incarnate His love for the world. And now the Son sends His chosen disciples to be His apostles, to speak in His stead and by His command. He ordains them with His breath. Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In the same upper room, Jesus had promised them the Spirit, the Paraclete, the Comforter, Guide, and Counselor who would lead and guide them into all truth, who would bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had said, who would convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment, who would testify of Jesus and bring glory to Him. And now He gives them the Spirit He had promised with His breath and words. And he sends them. That's what the word "apostle" means. Sent.

Their work is to deliver Jesus' words and breath and wounds to the world. Today we call it apostolic ministry. The Office of the Keys. The authority on earth to forgive sins. Jesus once healed a paralyzed man in order to demonstrate that He Himself had the authority on earth to forgive sins. It's easy to understand how Jesus has this authority. He has all authority in heaven and on earth granted to Him by the Father. But the fact that He authorizes men to forgive sin in His stead and by His command, by virtue of their office, that's something new and important.

Forgiveness in heaven does us no good. We're not in heaven, except in Christ, but in Christ we have no need for forgiveness. We're on earth. We're in this sinful body of death. We sin constantly, even when we are doing good works, because we do those works through our old sinful natures. Every thought, word, act, breath needs to be forgiven. It's nice that it's forgiven in heaven, but we need to be forgiven where we are. On earth. Sin tends to be rather "earthly," doesn't it. And it's right here, on the earth, in the middle of our fearful locked rooms, that Jesus drops a big forgiveness bomb. "For you."

Imagine ordering something online but never receiving it. Imagine ordering a take-out pizza and never having it delivered. Imagine winning the lottery and never cashing in the ticket. That's what the cross of Jesus is like without the Office of the Keys. It's gift without delivery. It's like God saying, "I bought a gift." And you say, "Great! Where is it?" And God says, "Well, I have it. I think you'll like it." And you say, "But I haven't received it, so how can I like it." And God says, "Well, just think about it and imagine how good it is. That's enough, isn't it?"

There's this great paragraph in the Large Catechism on the third article of the Creed, the article about the Holy Spirit and the church and forgiveness:

"Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. the work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by His sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation." (LC III.38)

Did you catch that? "In order that this treasure, the treasure of Jesus' sacrificial death and His glorious resurrection, the treasure of His victory over Sin and Death and the power of the Law to condemn, in order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed. For this saving and justifying faith, Christ established the Office of the Holy Ministry, authorized it with the keys of His authority, and gave it as a gift to His Bride, the church like a wedding present. Jesus so wants His church to hear forgiveness and enjoy it and live in its freedom that He created an office in the church and He put men under holy orders to forgive.

“If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven.” If you look at the history of that text, you find that some versions read “have been forgiven” while others read “will be forgiven” and the majority read “are forgiven.” And all three are true. Absolution holds past, present, and future. Sins forgiven have been, are, and always will be forgiven.

“If you withhold forgiveness...” Well, our translation seems compelled to add some words that aren’t there. Permit me a Greek moment: Whatever of theirs you bind, it is bound. Sins aren’t mentioned. Just whatever of theirs you bind. In the Bible you are bound by Sin and Death. Jesus binds the devil and He releases people from their bondage. A better way of understanding this passage is not about withholding forgiveness, although we do that when people don’t ask for it. A better way of hearing this verse is to think of both sides in the positive, as one Gospel gift thought. Sins are forgiven, Sin, Death, and devil are bound. The prisoners are set free, and their captors are bound.

The doors are unlocked. The disciples are free. And so are you. Last Sunday we heard about the gift given – Jesus crucified and risen. Today we hear about the gift delivered and received. Jesus crucified and risen for you, for your forgiveness, for your life, for your salvation, for your freedom. It’s safe to go out again.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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