

From doubt to certainty

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 23, 2017.

“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”
John 20:22-23

After the astonishing events of that first Easter with the realization that Jesus has defied the forces of evil and death, the disciples are hiding out in fear. The reference to their fear of the Jews is not to be construed as a reason to blame Jews for the death of Jesus. It is a reference to the authorities of the Jewish establishment that were among Jesus’ most ardent detractors. Those ultimately responsible were the Roman authorities who condemned him to death. Because the apostles are so fearful at the sound of footsteps or a pounding at the door, they are meeting behind a locked door.

When the risen Christ appears to the disciples, he offers them the traditional eastern greeting of good will, “Peace be to you.” This is the origin of the way we greet each other in the passing of the peace. While the disciples live in fear of persecution, they feel safer in the company of others in their community. In time, they would develop a culture of belief in the person and teachings of Christ with forgiveness and reconciliation at the centerpiece of their belief system.

John’s gospel tells us that in commissioning his disciples, Jesus “breathed on them.” Air, wind, and breath have Hebrew and Greek origins in describing the nature of the God’s Holy Spirit. In Genesis, we read how God breathes the breath of life into Adam to become a living soul. In Ezekiel, we read how God calls upon the four winds to breathe life into the dry bones of the spiritually dead nation. The invoking of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost breathes power into the church as an agent of reconciliation in the world.

In giving them the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus tells his disciples to declare God’s forgiveness to the people of God. If they forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven and if any sins are withheld, they are retained. That same declaration of God’s forgiveness was prayed over me as I knelt before my bishop at my ordination to the priesthood. That was my commissioning to proclaim God’s forgiveness. Those who are repentant are assured of God’s forgiveness while the unrepentant continue with the burden of their sin. Knowing how difficult it is to reconcile just two people estranged from each other, imagine what it was like for Archbishop Tutu to lead the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation after the end of apartheid system in South Africa.

One of the most powerful illustrations of forgiveness was seen a news photo of Pope John Paul II sitting alone in the prison cell of Ali Agca who shot and wounded him in May 1981. John Paul forgave him and asked that he be pardoned and released. Forgiveness is a process by which we give up whatever claim we have against others for their offense. It is all part of the inexplicable power and mystery of God’s love.

We are agents and instruments of proclaiming God’s forgiveness in Christ. We are his heart, mind, hands and voice in carrying out the ministry of reconciliation. What we say and do is in the name of Christ and not for self-promotion or personal cause. Our calling is to bring people together from alienation with God and each other. It is by the power of God’s Holy Spirit that our mission is carried out.

All but one of the disciples witnessed the appearance of the risen Christ. The apostle Thomas for some reason is not there. We don’t know where he was, but he missed out on the event that would change the course of human history. When the other disciples tell him what he missed, imagine his disappointment at being in the wrong place at the wrong time! He is understandably skeptical and is reluctant to accept the testimony of others. Because he wasn’t there to see for himself, he doesn’t want to risk being gullible. “Doubting Thomas” has to see for himself. He gets his chance eight days later when he is confronted face-to-face with the risen Christ. When he sees the marks in his side and hands, Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” That’s all the proof he needs. How fortunate are we who believe without such first hand evidence.

Just as Thomas is honest about his disbelief, we need not be apologetic about our own doubts. We come to a stronger belief by testing and critical thinking. Would that each of us could arrive at such a strong conviction about faith. I have learned to accept what I don't understand and lift up in faith any doubts and uncertainties. There is much I can't explain about life and human nature but it doesn't depend on my understanding. Being honest about questioning what we don't understand can lead to greater understanding and acceptance.

The 12th century French theologian Peter Abelard wrote that by doubting we come to inquiry and by inquiry we come to truth. Honest doubt need not be an enemy to fear, but a friend to know. There is much faith in honest doubt as our best means for thinking through some of the great mysteries of faith. Ultimately it leads to a closer relationship with Christ.