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Easter 2, Year A

Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

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“He breathed on them and said to them, “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.” In the name of One, Holy, and Undivided Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On the same day, on that first Resurrection Sunday, Jesus in John’s Gospel account appears first to Mary Magdalene alone outside of the tomb. After she tells the other disciples of her encounter, we are told in our passage today that Jesus meets with the other disciples – appearing to them in his Resurrection body, which still bears the wounds from his crucifixion, yet he defies the laws of matter as we understand them – he appears even though the doors are *locked*. Even though they have heard Mary Magdalene’s testimony, the disciples are still afraid, afraid that they will be arrested or crucified themselves. But Jesus appears in their midst, shows them his wounds, and we are told they rejoice – responding with great joy to God’s grace.

And then Jesus gives them a divine mission, “sending them out” to proclaim through word and deed the good news of Jesus’ Resurrection life. He breathes on them – that’s right, the newly resurrected Jesus breathes on his disciples – and says, “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.”

Thomas misses the party, and when the others tell him that they have seen the Risen Lord, he declares that he will not believe until he too sees and touches Jesus’ wounded flesh. A week later, Jesus appears again through a shut door to give Thomas what he has demanded. And Thomas believes, naming Jesus, “My Lord and My God.” Jesus, and his Spirit, have become Thomas’ now. Thomas has received faith, forgiveness, new life. There is no more locked door, no more barrier, between Thomas and his God, his maker, friend, and Advocate.

Jesus, speaking to Thomas, to the entire community of apostles gathered in that room, to the Christian community living during the writing of John’s Gospel, and to us today – says: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” The writer of the Gospel concludes the chapter with the purpose of this account: so that we “may come to believe (and continue to believe) that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing may have life in his name.”

So, what is Jesus doing here? Jesus is greeting us where we are, in our material, embodied reality, with his own scarred yet living Resurrection body. He who was in the beginning, with whom and for whom all things were made, is breathing new life into us. The God that breathed life into the nostrils of the first human being in Genesis 2, now breathes life into the community that is the Church, where earth and heaven meet.

This new life in Jesus means that we share his earthly mission. Like Jesus, the apostles here are not being sent out to judge or condemn the world, but to declare God's forgiveness in those places where there is repentance, where there are signs of the Holy Spirit's work of reconciliation. In what amounts to John's Gospel's version of the Pentecost, Jesus is bestowing upon his apostles the gift of his Spirit: the gift of faith and spiritual discernment. As a living witness to Jesus' Resurrected life on the earth, the Church is cosmically aligned with God's mission. This is not to say that all earthly institutions calling themselves the Church share in Jesus' Spirit – the Spirit moves as it wills, it cannot be contained by human beings. But the sure signs of its presence? Faith and forgiveness in Jesus' name.

Christian faith, then, is the acceptance of the Holy Spirit, which begins with a recognition of our smallness, our limits, and our interdependency and need for God and for each other. Faith is our continual surrender to God's gift of life and right relationship offered through Jesus and made possible through the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Forgiveness, then, is a foundational part of the Christian life. It is tied to our understanding of God's forgiveness of each of us as we pray following Jesus' example, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Forgiveness is a necessary part of our communal life – it is an essential part of the Church's sacrament of initiation, baptism, and part of our ongoing witness – forgiveness is what clears the ground so that faith, the gift of the Holy Spirit, can take root and transform.

Growing up in a five-point Calvinist Christian household, which is to say one that had a hefty focus on guilt, I decided to make my first Confession in the Episcopal Church in seminary, in large part because of how terrifying the process sounded. Even though I had faith in Jesus' name, I still hadn't fully learned to receive the forgiveness that was being offered to me. This refusal of God's grace was, I felt, affecting my relationships – my relationships with others, God, and myself.

I took my time preparing – a few months leading up to Holy Week one year – and I found that the process was humbling in an unexpected way. Sin, as it turns out, is social, as it reflects our messy relational reality. I learned that I needed to forgive as well as be forgiven. And even after absolution

was declared and I experienced the gift of God's grace, I *still* had trouble accepting forgiveness. Even into Easter Sunday that year, I realized that my preoccupation with my own sin, the weight of my guilt, was my locked door, my demand for evidence, my own self-created barrier to our Risen Lord.

Friends, the good news of the Resurrection is that no locked door, no doubt or resistance can keep us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Our God, the God who breathed and breathes new life into us, is a God of relationship. This is what Thomas understood when he declares Jesus is his Lord and God. Jesus opened Thomas' clenched fist, so that he could receive grace – the grace of forgiveness, which transforms relationships and sloughs off fear, and leads to abundant life. And this is why we gather, like the disciples in this passage, Sunday after Sunday on the anniversary of Jesus' Resurrection: so that we might repent and return to the name of Jesus anew, open ourselves to the forgiveness, healing, and new life he offers, and receive afresh the commission of the Holy Spirit: to go out into this world of locked doors and locked minds witnessing with joy to the God whose grace, mercy, and love can never be killed, can never be detained or explained into submission. Amen.