

Sermon, Wonder-filled Days, May 1, 2022

Wonder-filled days. The 40 days between Easter and Pentecost were definitely wonder filled for the followers of Jesus. And today's story is no exception. As you listened to today's scripture, what stood out for you? What did you wonder about? Might it have been related to the followers of Jesus? E.g.

- Why did the followers of Jesus gather that Sunday evening if they were afraid of the authorities?
- Why did they think a locked door would keep them safe?
- Or, was joy, the only emotion they felt when they saw Jesus?

Maybe you wondered something about what Jesus did. E.g.

- Did you wonder how Jesus got into the locked room?
- Or did you wonder why he showed his followers his wounds?
- Or did you wonder if his followers felt anything when Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on them?

Or maybe you wondered about something Jesus said. E.g.

- Did you wonder why he said: "Peace be with you." two times?
- Or maybe you wondered what he meant when he said: "As the Father sent me, so I send you."
- Or maybe you wondered what Jesus meant when he said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

These are some of the things that I wondered about as I read this scripture over and over the past couple of weeks. Hopefully in worship response time you will have the chance to share your wonderings and insights.

But now, I invite you to join me in using our imaginations in a slightly different way. Please imagine that Simon Peter is joining us this morning to share his first-hand experience of that first wonder-filled Easter.

Shalom and thank you for inviting me to visit you today. First off, I understand that 2 weeks ago you celebrated Easter and read the verses from John's gospel that came just before today's scripture reading. You heard that Mary went to the tomb early Easter morning and was terribly upset when she found the tomb empty. She ran and fetched John and me saying "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him."

We ran to the tomb and found it empty just like she said except for some folded grave clothes lying there. I thought, that seemed strange, hardly what you would expect from grave robbers. John thought, because of the grave clothes, that somehow Jesus had been resurrected or something. I thought, that was just wishful thinking on John's part. Confused, we trudged home, wanting to believe but afraid to hope. Later that day, Mary reported that Jesus had appeared to her after John & I had left! But we did not believe her. After all, why would Jesus appear to her, a woman, and not us men?

That evening, a bunch of us followers of Jesus, both men and women, got together. We had terribly mixed feelings. We had just seen the one we thought to be our long-awaited Messiah betrayed - by one of us no less; tried and convicted by both religious and civil authorities; and then brutally executed as though a common criminal. Our world as we knew it had collapsed. All our hopes and dreams gone!

Sure, Jesus had told us on more than one occasion that he would be killed, even that he would be crucified, but we didn't think it possible. We were still having trouble believing it had actually happened. We wondered, would the next step be, to round up his followers, to do the same thing to us? We were scared! We were so scared that we made sure the door of the room where we were meeting was locked.

Not only were we scared, but we were angry. We were angry at Judas for betraying Jesus – whatever his intentions were. We were angry at both the religious and civil authorities who made the decision to kill Jesus. And we were angry with those who carried out the orders.

We didn't know what to do. Some of us wanted to strike out and resort to violence. Others of us remembered what had happened in the garden. When the soldiers grabbed Jesus, I took my sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's slave. Jesus said: Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" And then he healed the soldier's ear!

We were really confused. We wondered why didn't Jesus let us fight for him. Why didn't Jesus save himself? Why did God abandon Jesus?

And to be honest, we were also embarrassed. Most of us men, had abandoned Jesus at the cross. If Mary was right, and Jesus really was alive, what would he say to us about all our desertions?

And I, I was the one who had proudly declared to Jesus, when he had predicted we would all abandon him, that I would never abandon him. And within hours I – not just once or even twice, but three times – I denied even knowing him! If he did turn out to be alive, how could I ever face him?

On the other hand, if the women were wrong, and Jesus was dead, how would we face all the people, who knew we had been wrong about him, and would say "We told you so"?

While we were circling round and round with our questions and frustrations, Jesus appeared – right there in the middle of the room in front of us! And instead of asking, why we had abandoned him, he simply said: "Peace be with you." Can you imagine how that felt to hear him say those words? In other words, he was saying "It is okay. I understand. I forgive you."

He followed these words by showing us the wounds in his hands and side proving that he was not a ghost, as some of us feared, it really was him! Wow! Did that room ever get noisy as we all burst into cheers. We were so relieved. It was so good to have him back with us again.

Then Jesus repeated the words “Peace be with you” and added: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then it got really quiet. So quiet that you could almost hear a pin drop. What was he saying? Was he sending **us** to carry out the same mission that got **him** killed? Were we to show and tell the world how much God loves them? Quite frankly, I wasn’t sure we were up for it.

Then, as if he could read my mind, Jesus did something strange. He breathed on us and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” I felt a soft, warm breeze surrounding me. I no longer felt so afraid or unsure. I felt the Spirit would equip me to do what God was calling me to do.

But Jesus wasn’t finished talking. He continued saying: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Hmm I wondered what did that mean.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t taught us about forgiveness before. You probably heard the story of some men dragging a woman caught in adultery to him and asking permission to stone her like the law said. Eventually Jesus told them that the one without sin could cast the first stone and of course they all left. And then he said to the women “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.” So, we learned we were not to judge others, and just because we are forgiven, doesn’t mean we should go out and sin again.

And did you hear how he taught us to pray, saying: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?”

He even forgave the people who crucified him saying: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

His words: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”, kept running through my mind. Was he suggesting that we could either forgive the sins of those who had attacked and killed him and who would probably continue to

persecute us, or we could retain or "hold onto" their sins, maintain our anger and our fear, and probably be paralyzed by it and likely not experience God's peace?

And why did Jesus seem to connect receiving the Holy Spirit with his teaching about forgiveness? Was he suggesting that the Holy Spirit would help us forgive the sins of others and experience God's peace? I think so.

Now when Jesus said "Peace be with you" as it is translated in your bibles, the word that is translated "peace" is our Hebrew word "Shalom." The meaning of Shalom though is much broader than your understanding of the word "peace." While your word "peace" is understood as the absence of noise, conflict or war etc. our understanding of Shalom is much broader. It encompasses right relationships with everyone and everything.

Right relationships with God, others, ourselves, and all of God's creation. Jesus taught us that forgiveness is a crucial element to experiencing right relationships with God, others, ourselves, and all creation.

Now I understand you have a ritual of passing the peace of Christ. I don't know what you usually think about when you say those words, but this morning I invite you to pass the peace in a slightly different way.

I invite you to simply exchange the greeting "Shalom" with the understanding that you are wishing each other right relationships with forgiveness with God, others, yourselves, and all creation.

To indicate how God is sending you out to share God's peace or shalom to the whole world, I invite the persons closest to the left front of each section to begin by greeting the person beside them with simply "Shalom, _____" with hands outstretched. That person responds with "Shalom" and then exchanges the greeting with the person to their right or at the end of the row behind them. The greeting should snake through the congregation in each section, so everyone is greeted.

On zoom you have a couple of options: You can look at each other and offer the greeting shalom. You can wait until the end of the service and verbally exchange the greeting before worship response time. Or you can call someone during the week to exchange the greeting “Shalom.”

When all three chains have reached the back of the sanctuary your chorister will lead you in your Hymn of Response. Shalom!