

I think it is easy for us to be sympathetic for and identify with how the disciples felt after Jesus' death. It is human nature to experience grief and loss, it was natural for the disciples to be gripped with fear, to be gripped with the fear that they would be next, that they would experience the same fate as their leader. After all Jesus told them plainly that the messenger is no greater than the master, and if they reject the master than surely they will reject and persecute the messengers also. They were terrified that Jesus meant what he said, that they too would experience torture and humiliation. A thoroughly natural response if you ask me.

It is also natural that the disciples were deeply saddened by the loss of their friend and mentor. Who among us here today, wouldn't be deeply grieved and saddened at the loss of our best friend? Or at the loss of a family member, that we loved so dearly? In those moments of loss, it can be natural for us to shut down, or seek isolation as we try to deal with the hard emotions, and realities of emptiness that are left when we lose someone that is dear to us. The disciples were so saddened that they gathered in the upper room and huddled together to the point of inertia, shutting down and choosing not to face the outside world. Another thoroughly natural response.

It too is natural that the disciples were bewildered by the reports of Jesus' resurrection. After all, death is the only certainty in life, and we all know that the dead stay dead. As Christians today, even though we have the stories and weight of historical faith and tradition to support us, we too can have difficulty believing the truth of Jesus' resurrection, we too can have our moments of doubt or sheer bewilderment as we grapple with the Christian story, as we hear the stories of God's activity in the world.

It is clear that after Jesus' death the disciples were in turmoil, there was no peace to be found amongst them. Peace was the furthest thing from their minds, and yet the moment Jesus appears to them that is what he offers them: "Peace be with you!" Jesus steps into their midst and offers his peace to his terrified, saddened and bewildered disciples. And how do they respond? Our passage tells us that they were startled and terrified, believing that they had seen a ghost. Again a natural reaction, it makes sense for the disciples to be startled by the miraculous presence of Jesus in their midst, but I'd argue it also makes sense that they are just as terrified by his words. "Peace be with you."

You might be asking yourself what is so terrifying about peace. Isn't that ultimately what the disciples wanted and needed in that moment? Isn't peace what each of us seeks in this world full of violence? Isn't peace what each of us wants when our lives are full of turmoil, when grief and sorrow surround us? If we asked a room full people what they would wish for if they had only one wish, I bet a healthy number of them would say world peace? So what is so terrifying about Jesus saying "Peace be with you."

Does Jesus really expect the disciples to have peace? How can they ever be at peace again after all that happened to them over the week we remember as Holy Week? Does Jesus really expect us to have peace, since this story is not just about the disciples? How do we find peace after our world is shattered? Can someone just say to us, "Peace be with you," and make it so? Not usually, at least in my experience.

We human beings are just not naturally creatures of peace. Whether we attribute our hunger for violence and betrayal and corruption to original sin, or to irresistible selfishness, or to the power of the superego, the fact of the matter is, we have to struggle mightily to live in peace with one another. We don't just betray one another or fail to take care of one another. It's worse than that. We refuse to forgive one another. Instead, we choose to hurt and kill one another, and we go to war with one another, and then we try to justify those actions.

This is why Jesus' words can be so terrifying, both to the disciples, and to us who hear them today. It is easier to not live in peace, it takes less work to hate someone, to hold a grudge. It takes less work to go to war with someone, to retaliate than to seek peace, than to seek reconciliation. As humans turmoil and war are easier for us to handle than the hard work of peace. Instead of doing the hard work of peace, the hard work of living into the peace that Jesus offers we cling on to our anger, we cling on to our grudges. We choose not to forgive one another, we live in fear and mistrust of those people around us. With our words we say "peace, peace", but in our hearts there is no peace.

Just as it took more than four simple words for the disciples to begin to feel the peace that Jesus called them into, so too does it take more than those four simple words to begin to live into the peace of Christ. There is only one way we can begin to experience this peace: We have to accept the grace that God offers us through Jesus Christ. We have to accept that God loves us just as we are, we have to accept that in Jesus Christ we have already been forgiven. We have to believe that Jesus did not succumb to the power of death, but rather that in his resurrection he has overthrown the power of death to separate us from God. Finally we must come to know that Jesus' words to his disciples, are meant for us too. Peace be with you.

Only when we know that God is at peace with us, that God bears no grudge towards us, that we are forgiven by God for our disobedience, our lack of peacefulness, only then can we begin to live out the peace of Christ in our lives. Only then can we begin the work of sharing the peace of God with the world around us. It begins with us laying our own burdens, our own turmoil, our own regrets and frustrations at the foot of the Cross and really believing that Jesus loves us, really believing that God's love for us is unconditional, that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. My prayer for you all this Easter season and forever more, is that you might know that you are truly loved by God, that you might accept God's offer of peace, and let God fill your hearts with Holy Spirit, so that you might in turn, forgive others and enable healing. Know that Jesus stands here in our midst saying "Peace be with you."

Amen