

Peace is with you

John 20: 19-31

Plymouth Congregational UCC-- Fort Collins, CO

April 3, 2005 -- On the Occasion of the Installation of Rev. Sharon Benton
Rev. Rebecca Voelkel

Holy One, you breathe on us and we are filled. You cherish our bodies and invite us to cherish yours. You move in and out and around us, offering your peace and your presence. Touch us, yet again. Touch my mouth and all of our hearts so that the words about to be spoken and the words about to be heard might be your word. Amen.

I watched her for days, but I couldn't figure out what to do. She always sat away from the others, often sliding down the wall to squat in the hallway. She kept her head buried in her arms, her body almost balled up. You could just feel the fear and the pain.

I didn't have any idea what her story was. But if she was anything like the others in the hospital, it included things that should never have happened to anyone, let alone a child.

Every day, I walked by her and tried to greet her, but she only flinched and pulled further away, my only acknowledgment that she had heard me.

I simply didn't know what to do, I couldn't get through to her.

One day, another chaplain in the hospital, Carol, came by. And as I watched, I knew I was seeing someone with a gift. I saw Carol notice the woman right away, but she simply walked by to have the conversation she was there to have. But on her way back, I watched Carol stand some five or six feet away and lean up against the wall. Then she slowly slid down the wall until she, too, was squatting. And there she sat for at least twenty minutes, just breathing deeply and slowly, resting her chin on her arms that were folded around her knees. And then Carol slowly stood up and walked away.

A few days later, I noticed Carol squatting near the woman again, only this time she was more like three feet away. Again she was simply breathing deeply and slowly. But this time, the woman had uncurled herself enough so that, she, too rested her chin on her folded arms.

It went on like this for most of the week. Carol would come and each time move a bit closer. And each time, the woman would uncurl a bit more. By the end of the week, the woman started talking with Carol. At first, as Carol reported later, it was only a few words. But as the weeks went by, Carol came to hear her story.

[pause]

The doors were bolted, the windows shut. And fear was in the air. It had only been a few days since they had witnessed the horrible execution of their friend and the shock was palpable. They were next, that was their deepest fear. They would be the ones to be humiliated and tortured. It was only a matter of time.

And so they had bolted the doors and hid away. Maybe, they could escape if no one noticed. Maybe they could disappear long enough to survive. It didn't matter what Mary had said. She must have been out of her mind. No hope could penetrate their terror.

And then Jesus is standing before them. "Peace to you," he says. And he holds out his hands and lifts up his clothing to reveal his torn side.

At the sight of his battered body, the disciples know. And they rejoice. And again, Jesus says to them, "Peace to you."

In the midst of the deepest kind of terror, when they have locked themselves up, barricaded the door, hidden themselves away, Jesus moves through the disciples' fear and finds a way to stand before them. And then he says, "Peace to you."

A number of scholars have said two interesting things about this interaction. The first is that "Peace to you" is often used by agents of God to let their hearers know that they are from God. It was the greeting Gideon heard from the angel. It was also what Daniel heard. Therefore it is a sign of revelation.

The second piece is that Jesus does not offer a wish or a prayer to the disciples, "May peace be with you." Instead, he makes a statement. Peace is here with you. And the meaning of "peace" in this moment is rooted in the Hebrew word, "Shalom" which means wholeness and justice and a kind of everything is balanced and rooted in the blessing of creation.

So when Jesus says "Peace to you," he is both announcing himself the child of God and making a kind of promise. Wholeness and justice and the blessing of creation are here, right now, in this place. It is not only in the future, God's peace is here, now.

In the midst of this promise of hope and wholeness, Jesus presents his wounds. It is as if to say, I am the one. I am he who was tortured and battered but I yet live. And then again, he offers the words, "Peace to you." And so this peace that Jesus offers is not some kind of la, la land peace. Instead it is a true kind of peace. It is shalom. It is the kind of wholeness that heals. It is the kind of justice that transforms. It is the kind of blessing that breaks the grip of death.

But Thomas is not with them when the rest of the disciples have this encounter. And when he hears about it, he refuses to believe. He needs to see and touch and feel for himself. He needs the same kind of experience that the rest of the disciples got to have.

Rather than refuse to be deterred by Thomas' anger or his doubting, Jesus comes once again. The doors are still locked, so the rest of the disciples must have needed a second encounter, too. And again, Jesus stands before all of them, including Thomas, and again says the words, "Peace to you." And again he offers his broken hands and his torn side. But this time, he invites Thomas to touch and feel.

Again, we have the statement of shalom. Peace is here and now. Wholeness and justice are here amongst us. And again we have the offering of the broken body to touch and feel and know the reality of life overcoming death.

[pause]

My friends, the woman that Carol squatted with and came to know may be a particularly strong metaphor. But some part of each of us knows her. Some part of us, as individuals and as a community, crouches down, curled up to protect ourselves. Some part of us hides ourselves away and locks the doors.

What is it in you that has barricaded the doors? What is it in this community that keeps you stuck and immobilized? Some part of us recognizes the woman next to whom Carol crouched. Some part of us recognizes the disciples fear.

But the good news of the Easter season is that God does not allow us to stay behind our bolted doors. God does not settle for the reality of terror in our lives. God does not chafe at our anger or our doubt, but instead finds ways to meet us. God finds a way to come and stand before us and utter, not a wish for the future, but a blessing in the here and now. God finds a way to slide down the walls against which we huddle and simply breathe with us for a while, moving slowly closer until we can take the risk to trust enough to speak our stories.

And part of the shalom that God offers is God's vulnerable body, broken yet living, crucified, yet resurrected.

For me, this is a word of great hope. We need not be trapped in our fear. We need not be confined by our despair. God will come to us. God will be with us to heal and to offer shalom.

But in both episodes of our Scripture today, the story doesn't end with the healing of the disciples. As important as that is, it is not the end of the story. In both parts of the Scripture for today, Jesus challenges and commissions the disciples-- and by extension-- us.

In the first part, after offering shalom and the testimony of his broken body, Jesus tells the disciples, "As the Father-Mother has sent me, so do I send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, with the words: Receive a holy

Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you hold them, they are held fast."

It is as if Jesus says, your healing is important, it is vital. But my shalom cannot be only for you. You did not receive God's wholeness and justice so that you might remain locked away with only your friends. You must be bearers of God's spirit and God's forgiveness to the world. But beware, being bearers of the Spirit is filled with power and responsibility. How you live matters. Use the grace and healing you've been given to further that grace and shalom in the world-- it can release people. But your unforgiveness can also perpetuate brokenness.

And at the end of the encounter with Thomas, he also offers both Thomas and us a challenge. It is as if Jesus says, it is OK that you needed to touch and feel. Sometimes we need those palpable signs. But remember that sometimes the reality of shalom, the reality of wholeness and justice and genuine peace are not visible to the naked eye. Instead, there are days when we must live in the reality that the promise is real.

So what does this have to do with the wonderful occasion for which we have gathered today? You may think I've forgotten that today, we honor and solemnize a covenant that you, Plymouth and Sharon, are making with one another.

But I promise, I haven't forgotten. Indeed, as I read and studied and prayed about today's scripture, it was with all of you close in my heart.

Today, you, as a community, pause and articulate again what it is that calls you into ministry. You pause and remember for what you have brought Sharon and Jamie half-way across the country. As you covenant with Sharon, you re-commit yourselves to the mission and ministry of this church and of the wider Christian community.

And Sharon, today, you stand before this congregation-- a group of people who you already love with your whole heart and soul-- and remember why you chose to uproot your life, leave your home and ask Jamie to travel out West to a place that was really practically unknown to you.

You both have chosen to make the covenant because this ministry-- Plymouth's and Sharon's together-- is rooted in the fear-breaking, shalom-bringing, en-fleshed Body of the Risen Christ. And you have chosen to make the covenant because you are called to be about the congregational life and care of this particular Christian community.

As I hear this, it means taking the time to literally and metaphorically find ways to slide down the wall and sit next to one another and breathe deeply. It means literally and metaphorically finding the ways to move through the bolted doors of

fear that each of us erect. It means literally and metaphorically finding ways to touch and be touched so that we might know the reality of resurrection in our lives.

And it means literally and metaphorically being called beyond this small gathering into a wider world, which, so desperately needs us to be embodi-ers and announcers of the Word: "Peace is here with you"-- wholeness and justice and God's shalom is here, in this moment within you, around you and among you.

And I, for one, am filled with joy as I contemplate this ministry. For I know of no more faithful, ethical, woman of God than Sharon Benton. And I know of her excitement to do ministry with and among you. May you know of the Risen Christ and, knowing, breathe deeply together, unbolt the doors and move passionately in the world.

[pause]

Peace to you. Amen.