

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, April 19, 2020
“Peace Instead of Fear” (*John 20:19-31*)

Every year, on this the Second Sunday of Easter, our gospel lesson is this same passage in John, revolving around the appearance of the Risen Christ to his followers. I suspect we usually have a hard time relating with these disciples. Here, it is the evening of the very first Easter Sunday. The tomb is empty. Mary Magdalene has encountered the risen Christ in the garden. And yet, his friends are gathered fearfully behind locked doors. For people who have celebrated Easter with joyous hallelujahs, in sanctuaries decorated with colourful flowers, and filled with more people than usual dressed in their finest, shaking hands and hugging, while children race around on a sugar high (courtesy of the Easter Bunny), hiding out on this day of all days is hard to imagine.

It is a very different story this year. We are all in self-isolation, and may feel as if we too are hiding out behind doors barred to any and all outsiders. Certainly, that seems to be the feeling of one of the residents at Oak Ridges Retirement Residence where I am still allowed to visit my Mom each day. When I appear pushing my Mom's wheelchair, she demands to know how I, an “outsider”, managed to get in. She is worried that somehow I have evaded the screening, and the temperature check. Her fears are not unwarranted. Our enemy is, if anything, scarier than the one that faced the first disciples. At least, they can recognize the religious leaders by their dress, if not their faces - these people who felt their power and authority were so threatened by Jesus that they plotted his elimination. At least they can see the scarlet cloaks and the flashes of light off helmets and armour, and hear the shouted orders and the marching of sandalled feet before the Roman soldiers are actually upon them. COVID-19 is much more sneaky. It presents in a variety of ways. Even people who are asymptomatic can

spread the disease. As a result, we need to keep physically distanced from everyone: no Easter dinners with extended family, no get togethers with friends, no gatherings in community for parades or Easter egg hunts or worship.

The disciples are afraid the authorities may decide it would be safer and wiser to go beyond eliminating the leader and wipe out the entire movement. That is reason enough to take cover, but there may be more going on. These disciples all had their own lives before Jesus came along. They knew who they were - the son of..., the wife of... - and had a role in society as a fisher, a tax collector, a zealot, a demon possessed beggar, a homemaker. When Jesus entered the scene, everything changed: they left their homes and families, their communities and occupations to follow him. All their time was spent with him - walking the roads of Galilee, listening to Jesus' teaching, asking questions, watching Jesus heal, sharing meals and stories. Jesus had warned them that the end was coming, that his entry into Jerusalem would result not in his enthronement, but in this death. They had heard his words, but the reality of his arrest, trial and execution still took them by surprise. Suddenly, their lives have been turned upside down. They have lost everything: not only the one who was their leader, their teacher, their friend, but also their jobs, their identity, their daily routine. Who are they without Jesus? What are they to do now? Where should they go? Nothing is clear. Nothing is certain. They are probably feeling more than a little overwhelmed. Cocooning behind closed doors feels like a good option.

Our lives like those of the disciples have been tossed up in the air. Not just in this small corner of the planet, but around the world. Adults have lost jobs - employment that was essential for putting food on the table and paying the rent. Luckier ones are still

working, but from home, needing to find new and innovative ways to get things done. Adolescents and young adults, counting on articling positions and internships to launch their careers or relying on summer jobs to pay tuition are seeing possibilities evaporate. Children are barred from attending school, playing with their friends, and participating in sports. Seniors, living in retirement residences or long term care facilities, have been placed on lockdown without visitors and volunteers to brighten their days. And those are the fortunate ones - to quote our premier, COVID-19 is spreading like wildfire through some of these facilities. Activities taken for granted like going to a restaurant, cinema shopping mall, park, gathering for church or a recreational activity or meeting, attending a concert or hockey / basketball / baseball game are out of the question. Plans made for celebrations, visits, travel are all having to be set aside - should they be re-scheduled for the Fall or next year or put off indefinitely? Like the disciples, we have been cut off from the life we knew. Like them, we have no clear idea where we go from here. We too may be feeling fearful and overwhelmed.

The disciples may be hiding out behind locked doors, but the risen Christ still manages to appear right in their midst. His first words to them are: "Peace be with you." On the surface, this may sound like nothing more than the usual greeting in that society - an equivalent to our "hello". But on Jesus' lips, on this, the evening of the first Easter, they take on new meaning. Jesus knows his disciples are afraid. Why wouldn't they be after all that has happened? Jesus is aware that when we human beings are afraid, our instinct for self-preservation kicks in. We either become paralyzed, immobilized like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights or totally revved up ready to fight or flee. No matter which way our anxiety manifests itself, one thing is for sure, we are not in any

position to take in a message or teaching, much less to join in God's mission and ministry in this world God loves. No wonder, when an angel appears in the pages of scripture, when one of God's messengers speak, their first words are usually: "Be not afraid" - both an acknowledgement of our natural human response, and an assurance that with God's help, these feelings can be set aside and even overcome. When Jesus says: "peace be with you", he is acknowledging that his disciples are not feeling peaceful, but this can change. He is not offering them any sort of timeline or a detailed plan on how the future will unfold. He is not promising that things will go back to the way they were before, and they can slide back into their comfortable old roles. He is not telling them that "everything will turn out fine"; "you will be alright". What he is giving them is his peace, a peace that is not dependent on external circumstances, a peace that comes from an awareness they are not alone. Not when they take to the streets of Jerusalem to spread the good news. Not when they stand before the authorities and are questioned about their words and actions. Not even when they face hardship and persecution.

As this pandemic trundles onwards, we may be anxious, stressed, confused, frightened. Like the disciples, we have no timeline for when things may start to open up again, no blueprint for the future. No one can promise us we'll be fine - that we won't get COVID-19, and our loved ones will remain healthy; that there will be jobs for us when this is all over, and life will return to what it was before. Nevertheless, we can still have inner peace. Richard Rohr in Tuesday's daily meditation wrote:

Jesus says, "There's only one sign I'm going to give you: the sign of the prophet Jonah" (see Luke 11:29, Matthew 12:39, 16:4). Sooner or later, life is going to lead us (as it did Jesus) into the belly of the beast, into a situation that we can't fix, can't control, and can't explain or understand. That's where transformation

most easily happens. That's when we're uniquely in the hands of God. Right now, it seems the whole world is in the belly of the beast together. But we are also safely held in the loving hands of God, even if we do not yet fully realize it.

May we be aware that it is God's loving hands holding us. May we be filled with peace.

May that peace flow out into the world around us. Amen.