

First Baptist Church of Augusta
John 20:19-23
When the Bunny Leaves the Building: Easter Aftermath
April 19, 2009
Eastertide

John 20:19-23

"When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." [20] After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. [21] Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." [22] When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

By now, the Easter baskets are put away, the chocolate rabbit, if there is anything left, has probably lost its ears, and whatever new clothes were bought, are now suddenly and unavoidably old. It is equally clear that the bunny has left the building, when you go to the chain stores dotted around this city. Try looking for a chocolate rabbit at *Target* or *Wal-Mart*. Easter is a commercial memory and the stores have moved on to the next marketable holiday – *Mother's Day!*

While consumers are looking for something new to consume, we of the faith community still have an old and yet new story to tell. Today, we listen to John's telling of the story and he reminds us that it is still Sunday, the first day of the week, and while the bunny has left the building, the disciples have locked themselves inside.

Easter Resurrection may be the historic moment of the empowered people of God, but it doesn't look that way behind that fearfully locked door.

Do you remember a time when churches kept their doors unlocked? Or, if it was locked, most everyone in town knew where the key was hidden. There was nothing to fear, after all, who would do anything to the church? My, how times have changed! I remember one particular Sunday at the small church where I served as pastor when I was a student in seminary. While I was preaching the sermon, someone went into my office and found Amy's pocketbook and stole her purse. Just a few years ago, at my last pastorate, while I was preaching, someone went into my office and swiped my cell phone. We have to lock doors now to keep people out.

Here in this story, the disciples are locking doors too. Though they saw first hand the power of God, they were now found locked behind closed doors in fear and hiding. These men and women hardly looked the part of an empowered church. They were *a fearful* church. The fearful church comes when circumstances, events, and tragedies come our way, and we have no explanation, no understanding, or no imagination to see or do anything else, but to hunker down and lock the doors.

The disciples had shut the doors to keep the people out. Rumors were outrageous and the fearful politics had seeped inside. But when Jesus comes in, he takes over the meeting. The first thing that Jesus wanted to do following the raising of the dead, is that he wants to be with his people who are in fear and hiding.

Jesus wants to say four things to his church, and on this week after Easter, I hold that the risen Lord wants to say the same four things to us:

1) "Peace be with you"

Peace is the first word that Jesus speaks to the fearful church. Peace, that is *shalom*, was the common word Jews used to greet one another. Today, you can go to Jerusalem and buy a small tile hanging that says, “Shalom ya’ll.” But, it is not just a word that means “howdy.” In fact, Jesus is more direct, *Peace be with You*. He says it twice. Relax, don’t worry, God has heard your anxiety.

This powerful word on the lips of Jesus redefines everything. When Jesus speaks this word, he puts to flight all of the “un-peace” like things in our life – war, hostility, fear, anxiety, alienation, loneliness – none of that counts anymore. There was a time when this stuff seemed to count, and this was part of the reason the early church locked its doors and hid out of fear. But now, Jesus has come and has trumped it all. He has his battle scars. He shows them his hands – there, that is where they hammered the nails. He shows them his side – there is where the spear made its piercing. He has his scars but they don’t matter. Eastertide is the day when we let the peace of Jesus over-ride all the un-peace stuff – to which we pay too much attention.

2) “As the Father has sent me so I send you.”

This meeting is not just a presence but a mission. The move from a quaint social gathering to one that is swirling with action, busy with the energetic enterprise of changing the world. The problem with the fearful church is that it doesn’t think it is sent. It has become a resting place of achievement and an end to itself. “Isn’t it great to be here?” we say to ourselves.

I have had the privilege of living in many places – from as far away as the Philippine Islands, to as close by as neighboring Lake Oconee. Every place I have called my home, the natives there have said, “You do not want to go anywhere else because this is God’s country.” And I am strengthened in part by the local’s pride in their community. *Why do I want to go anywhere? I am right here!*

When you are “here,” you do not want to go anywhere. So the church in North America tends to be safe and settled and comfortable and not going anywhere. But Eastertide should change all of that: “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” He sends liberals, conservatives, republicans and democrats – all to the same place: the neighbor whom God loves and the neighbor in need. It is a tough word. A word that says you cannot just “hang around.” We are not an end but a means of sending.

We are not a destination but a mission. In the upcoming weeks, we will be voting to begin construction on beautiful additions to our facilities: the long awaited chapel, the fellowship hall, and expanding our Activities Building for staging. When a church has facilities as nice as ours, one can understand how easy it is to begin to think that it all ends here. We are not an end, however; we are a beginning – not a destination, but a mission. The fearful church believes in a place; the sent church believes in a mission.

3) The third message from Jesus to the fearful church is, “Receive the power of the Spirit.”

He breathed on them, recalls a time when by God’s breath, life was first given to human form. The Holy Spirit is the intruding, invading, energizing power of God that comes in like the wind, and blows us beyond ourselves. The Holy Spirit causes us to do things that we never thought we could do, to dream dreams we never would have dreamed, to take chances we ordinarily never would risk. The church is never to go anywhere important under its own steam. “*You will receive power...*,” and God’s wind will blow you away, and you will find yourself doing things you never thought you could do, because you are caught up in God’s future.

You are subject to the power of God that will carry you where God is sending you. It is a miracle, and you are a candidate for God’s miracle to go and do something, that will make a difference for the healing of God’s world. The wind is blowing. It is blowing in Hungary, as servants seek to remind Roma gypsies, “While your government does not think you count, God counts you.” It is blowing in Liberia. It is blowing Augusta. It

is blowing among Palestinians. It is blowing in Israel. It is blowing in Congress. It is blowing in Churches and families. It is blowing, because the risen Jesus will never accept fearful lethargy. We can expect to be visited and summoned and surprised by the blowing of God's Holy Spirit.

4) If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Jesus says to the fearful church, you have one primary important business in the world – it is to forgive. You know that the world craves nothing so much as to be forgiven, so that they can start over. The world cannot forgive itself, and you cannot forgive yourself. Forgiveness can only come from the very large heart of God. The church of Easter is given fresh work to do. It is to move in and break the vicious cycles that generate death and death and death! Unless there is forgiveness, the cycle goes round and round. It creates despair and abuse. It locks people into poverty, brutality, and exploitation. Families play the games of not forgiving generation after generation, which always ends in some form of abuse and hostility. To not forgive finally kills both the victim and the perpetrator. God has created a people in this place, whose main business is the forgiveness of sin, the cancellation of debt, and breaking the cycle of death. In the Gospel of John, to have sin, is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus.

Imagine us gathered fearfully behind closed doors, and Jesus comes to say four things to us. Jesus is a gate-crasher. You can lock all the doors of fear and insecurity, but these four words will break through. And when these four words break through, **the gates of hell cannot stop the truth of the gospel!** A new people was born and the church started. And when you hear these four words you need never be the same again. Jesus in his lordly power is reshaping you.

It is true, the Easter Bunny has left the building, and so should we. We, the city on a hill, have a holy light to shine, as the church that teaches and learns, the church that shares and engages, and the church that is being and living as the presence of Christ.

It is our mission; it is our holy duty; it is what Jesus said to us, and we will have to live with these words.