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4/19/20--University Presbyterian Church  
John 20:19-31

## FORGET NORMAL

When Jesus walks into the locked room, the first thing he offers is peace. When Jesus walks into that locked room where his disciples are gathered because they are afraid for their well-being, because they are rightly afraid of the forces outside that room that threaten their lives, the first thing he offers them is peace. So maybe as we sit locked up in our homes, in our own time of anxiety and fear, maybe there is a message in this story for us. Jesus offers peace.

But what *kind* of peace? That is an important question. What kind of peace? I can imagine the kind of peace the disciples probably wanted from Jesus. Knowing that the hostile crowds and the Roman soldiers that crucified Jesus lay just outside their door, the disciples probably wanted a kind of peace that comes when you are safe and protected from harm. After the traumatic and turbulent events of Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples probably wanted the kind of peace that comes when there is no longer uncertainty and chaos in life and when life goes back to normal. *That* is the kind of peace they were probably hoping Jesus would deliver to them.

It's the kind of peace I find myself wanting. Maybe you do too. I want the peace I knew before this pandemic hit. I want the peace that comes from knowing that my children's lives are back on track and that they can pursue their dreams unimpeded. I want the peace that comes from knowing that my husband's research can resume. I want the peace that comes in the gentle Sunday mornings when our congregation gathers for worship. I want the peace that is possible when there is no longer any anxiety about leaving the house, a peace rooted in a secure sense of daily well-being. I want the peace that is found in a strong stock market and confidence in a

solid retirement fund. I want the overall peace of mind I enjoyed before the crisis. I want things to go back to normal.

That's what we hear people talking about don't we? "When things go back to normal." But the last thing, the *very last thing* the Resurrected Christ offers us is a return to normal. And *that* is the bad news about the good news of Jesus Christ! The very last thing the Resurrected Christ offers us is a return to normal.

When the Resurrected Jesus walks through those locked doors, the first thing he offers is peace. Not the kind of peace we wrap ourselves in like a comfortable blanket to insulate ourselves from hardship. Not the kind of peace we *create* for ourselves to feel secure--like bank accounts, and successes, and achievements. Not the kind of peace that is separated from suffering and trials. In fact, after Jesus offers the disciples peace, the very next thing he does is show them his wounds. Do you remember that part of the story? He shows them the wounds on his hands and his side. He shows them the places on his body that testify to his personal suffering. And then he does it again later for Thomas who wasn't there when he first appeared to the disciples. He tells Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." Jesus does not divorce peace from the reality of suffering. Instead, the peace Jesus offers is given in the midst of suffering and hardship and uncertainty and pain. The peace *we* want is a peace that comes when we no longer experience anxiety or uncertainty or hardship. And so we spend much of life trying to secure that kind of peace. But that is not the peace Christ gives.

The peace Jesus offers is grounded *not* in a life without suffering but in a peace rooted in his presence with us, a peace that comes from his transforming presence of love and forgiveness. Think about those frightened disciples locked in that room. They had so badly messed up. They

had forsaken Jesus, denied Jesus, betrayed Jesus. And not only are they ashamed but they are terrified for their own lives. But instead of condemnation, Jesus offers them peace found in his grace. And that love and forgiveness changes them. And they get up and leave that locked room with the peace of Christ in their hearts and minds and they walk out into a world that is far from peaceful, or certain, or safe. Many of them will be rejected by their families and communities. Some of them will be imprisoned. Some of them will be beaten, even killed. Suffering will be part of their reality. But they go forward into that world as changed people because they have Christ's peace. This peace sustains them. And this peace empowers them to go out into the world with Christ's transforming, healing, justice-filled love.

For some of us Americans who have not previously known much of the world's sufferings and uncertainties of life, this crisis has been a real shock. For many Americans, poverty is something we read about. Wars are events on the other side of the globe. Plagues occur in remote parts of the world. But now, in this pandemic, adversity has landed on our doorstep. And we are deeply afraid--not only for our personal well-being and our loved ones but also for the welfare of our nation. And we chafe at this time of suffering and uncertainty. Americans yearn for and, in some cases, are demanding a return to normalcy. Of course we want to be freed from our homes. We want to be able to return to work and to school and to church. We want to get a haircut and to tend to the small as well as important matters of life. We humans do not thrive well in sustained periods of chaos and upheaval. So our desire for normalcy is understandable.

But there is also an aspect to our desire for a return to peaceful normalcy that is predicated on a *false* notion of peace. One of the things this pandemic has done is to expose the lack of genuine peace and well-being so many people in our nation and world knew before the

virus came along. There was no real peace for refugees languishing in refugee camps for years and decades, who are now gravely vulnerable to the ravages of this virus. There was no real peace or well-being for migrant workers and immigrant peoples in this nation who were vilified as criminals and rapists and evil, but who now are suddenly needed to pick our crops in the midst of a pandemic so that the rest of America can continue to eat. There was no peace for homeless people struggling to get by who have no safe place to shelter from the virus. Now that schools are closed and children have to learn from home, there is no genuine peace for the twelve million children in this country who have no internet access at home. The disproportionate way the virus has affected minority populations reveals the structural inequalities in health care, access to healthy foods, and systemic poverty that existed before the virus came along. There is no genuine peace in such circumstances, not according to the *biblical* understanding of peace which means more than the absence of violence but includes the presence of justice and well-being.

So the "normal" many of us crave was never grounded upon a genuine peace. It was never grounded upon the peace God intends or the peace Christ offered his disciples when he walked through those locked doors--or the peace he offers us now when he walks into our homes today.

Instead of a return to normal, the Resurrected Jesus offers us something that will transform us: his peace. His genuine peace. He gives the peace that comes from the presence of his love and forgiveness in the face of our fears, our pain, our failures, our struggles. It is a peace that will not shelter us from adversity but one that sustains us and guides us and empowers us in the midst of adversity. And it is a peace that enables us to enter the world--this broken, suffering, damaged, sometimes frightening world--to extend his transforming love and grace.

Resurrection is not about a return to normal. It is about the transformed life Jesus offers us and our world. The *last* thing the Resurrected Christ offers us is a return to normal.