

Being Easter People – Forgive
John 20:19-31
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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When the holiday is over, do you find yourself just ready to move on? Maybe it's after Christmas when the food has been eaten, the gifts unwrapped, and suddenly all the work you've been doing (maybe even for months) is done and you are just ready to move on to the new year.

Maybe you had some of those feelings at the beginning of this last week. While our preparations and celebrations aren't quite as extreme at Easter, still there are egg hunts and Easter baskets, Easter clothes and meal preparation. And, after the year we have had, for many this Easter was a first gathering with family or friends who you have been missing. But maybe after the last worship hymn was sung and a final proclamation of "Christ is risen" made, after the ham and deviled eggs were eaten, after the last plastic Easter egg was discovered under a bush in the yard, after everyone went home...maybe you found yourself ready to move on.

Well, I am here to tell you that I hope that is not the case. Yes, feel free to put up the plastic eggs until next year...feel free to be glad your leftovers are gone...feel free to eat that last chocolate bunny.

But, for people of faith, Easter is not over. Rather, Easter is not a day but a season...and really, at the heart of Christianity, it is a way of life. So, put away the decorations, but hold on to Easter as if it is here to stay!

Over the next several weeks, as we continue through the Easter season, we will explore together the question of what it means to be Easter people. Because after all, Easter is not just about the story of Jesus...it is also about how those of us who claim to be his followers live and love in this world.

As one of my favorite commentators, David Lose, wrote as he reflected on the resurrection story from Mark – you remember the one...we heard it last week...the one that ends saying, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8, NRSV). Well, David Lose writes this:

"The story of what God is doing in and through Jesus isn't over at the empty tomb, you see. *It's only just getting started.* Resurrection isn't a conclusion, it's an invitation. [It] is all about setting us up to live resurrection lives and continue the story of God's redemption of the world" [Easter B: Only the Beginning | ...In the Meantime \(davidlose.net\)](https://www.davidlose.net/2020/04/11/easter-b-only-the-beginning-1...in-the-meantime/).

The same can be said not only of Mark's gospel, but of the Jesus story in entirety. It isn't just about what Jesus did for us, but it is about setting us up and sending us forth to live in Jesus' ways.

So, friends, what if we embraced this?

What if we really lived as if resurrection isn't a conclusion, but an invitation?

What if, as Disciples pastor Erin Wathen reflected on Facebook this week, we didn't settle into those words of a favorite Easter hymn that say, "love's redeeming work is done" (from *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*) but instead understood "That God is not finished making things new. And that we are not finished doing the work"?

What if we embraced even the hard work of living as Easter people?

Because, if we pay attention, being Easter people is not easy. We see this in the disciples' responses to the risen Jesus. Mary doesn't recognize Jesus initially, but when she does she tells the others she has seen him. But when he comes to them - walking right through a locked door - the disciples don't immediately rejoice, not until he speaks and shows them his wounds. Apparently they didn't really believe Mary just as Thomas later didn't believe them.

And there is story after story of the disciples still being afraid, hiding behind locked door, struggling to understand. We see evidence throughout the resurrection stories that being Easter people is challenging.

Although, if we are honest, we don't mind seeing other people's challenges. We don't mind wondering why Mary didn't recognize Jesus. We don't mind deeply associating the word "doubting" with Thomas' name. We don't mind wondering why the disciples didn't get it.

But, are we willing to admit that being Easter people is challenging for us as well.

In this story we often focus on Jesus' resurrection, the reactions of Thomas and the other disciples. But maybe we do this so we don't have to listen to what Jesus says. Because if we listen then we know that he speaks not only to them, but to us.

If we listen, we have to admit that being Easter people isn't just about believing something about Jesus. It isn't just knowing the stories. Being Easter people is a responsibility that is given to us. And it is a responsibility that asks hard things of us.

Did you hear what Jesus said in today's text? We often read right past it, so I want us to hear it again. Beginning in verse 21 and reading through verse 23 we hear this: *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"* (John 20:21-23, NRSV).

What do you notice?

Peace be with you. It was a routine greeting in Jesus' time. But let's not pretend that's all it was. Jesus greeted the disciples with peace...with an option that would allow them to live beyond their fear. Too often we talk about peace as if it is weak or passive, but the peace that Jesus lived was courageous and active. And it was with this peace that he not only greeted the disciples, but into this peace that he invited them and from this peace that he sent them...and the same invitation is given to us.

Peace be with you...as you are sent out...and, notice – not sent alone, but Jesus breathed on them granting them the presence of the Spirit. See John doesn't give us the big public coming of the Spirit that Luke shares, but instead the intimate interaction between Jesus and his followers...the quiet gift of strength and companionship for the journey.

And then Jesus concludes with this statement about forgiveness. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23, NRSV). Now, let's be cautious and remember that rarely in the Bible is "you" singular, but rather it's "ya'll." This isn't about being granted some magical power to forgive those we agree with while we punish others with our lack of forgiveness. This isn't about me or you taking all the power of forgiveness to ourselves.

Rather, this is the reminder that when we are sent forth courageously in the name and Spirit of Jesus, we are sent forth rooted in God's forgiveness.

Forgiveness, not the false kind where we pretend everything is okay in the midst pain, or sweep sin under the rug. As D. Cameron Murchison says, "The missionary people empowered by this peace and this inbreathed Holy Spirit bear the forgiving, transforming love of God into every sphere of human experience" (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, 404).

Forgiving isn't about pretending or moving on so we don't have to talk about it...it is about transforming the world so that the world becomes what God intends.

I wonder what the world would look like if we really lived as those who companion with God's Spirit.

I wonder what the world would look like if we really lived as those who were rooted in peace.

I wonder what the world would look like if we really embraced what it means to be a forgiven people and if we lived in ways that invited others into that reality.

There is a quote I came across recently that resonated with me: "Forgiveness already exists - now and eternally. We do not create it; we enter it" (Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Forgiveness, the Passionate Journey: Nine Steps of Forgiving through Jesus' Beatitudes*; Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2001, 22).

What if we lived in this reality? What if we were looking for ways to enter again and again, for ourselves and for the world, the reality of forgiveness? I wonder what it would look like if we did that here and now rather than waiting for this reality in some far off place in the future.

If we believe the story we read today, Jesus has offered us the tools...the gift of peace in which to root our lives and the companionship of the Holy Spirit. Now it is up to us to live with and from these gifts, to embrace and share God's forgiveness, and in doing so to bring wholeness to this fragmented world.

This is our challenge...to live as people of forgiveness and reconciliation...to live as Easter people.