

Lenten Devotional April 4, 2021

Scripture

John 20:19-23

19 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."

Devotional

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This passage from John's Gospel follows his telling of the crucifixion. Loss, agony, death, a desolation of hope—that's the immediate backstory. At this point, the disciples are what today we'd call trauma survivors. Still in shock from the casual violence of his public execution, they now fear for their own lives.

Their suffering must have been beyond description. Perhaps, that's why the Gospel writer didn't try to describe it. He names only their fear. And perhaps John's very silence on the disciples' inner states may be our doorway to the story.

Perhaps you've lived through a loss that left you devastated. The hard truth is that many people do. Wordless questions arise. "How can I go on? How could all this have happened?" In the wake of the unspeakably awful, a strange guilt often arises to compound the misery. "Could I have done more? Was I somehow to blame?" Can you identify?

John bears witness to a reality of this human life. Be it trauma or a chronic, dull ache, suffering is part of our common ground. Reader take note: it's precisely into an assembly of agonized trauma survivors that the risen Christ appears.

He appears first with a greeting that's also a benediction, repeated twice for good measure: "Peace be with you." Beyond any judgment or blame, the words convey the same grace as the Father's greeting to the returned Prodigal (Luke 15:11-32). The timing is remarkable. It comes forthrightly and clearly to suffering hearts. Remarkable too, that the Risen Christ confers a directive, an assignment to people at the very nadir of hopelessness: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," he says. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus told the disciples something very clear about this sending: As he was sent by the God he called Father, he now sends them "Not to *condemn* the world, but that the world might be *saved*" (John 17:2-3). Marching orders for trauma survivors. Perhaps none other than they are so well suited to recognize the suffering of the world.

The disciples are charged with the care of the same lovely and sordid, sweet and deadly world through which Jesus moved. There is no evasion. Conferred with a God-like authority to forgive or retain sins, they are sent not for condemnation but compassion. They will move forward on paths they cannot yet imagine, not on the strength of their own merits but with the gifts of Holy Spirit. In the steadfast love of God, the undeniable traumas of life are not the *end* of this story but a mysterious *beginning*.

Prayer

To you, God of all moments, we lift up our hearts. May we hear your voice of blessing and empowerment in moments when our vision penetrates no farther than our suffering. May we find ways forward when our imaginations and hopes grow dim. May we find compassion when we are tempted by the false refuge of cynicism. Remind us again and again that, in You, life and love are eternal and that all the world's unfolding moments are held in Your hands.