

## **John 20:19-31 (The NET Bible (Noteless))**

### *Jesus' Appearance to the Disciples*

<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the disciples had gathered together and locked the doors of the place because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."<sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you."<sup>22</sup> And after he said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."<sup>23</sup> If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."

### *The Response of Thomas*

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.<sup>25</sup> The other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the wounds from the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe it!"

<sup>26</sup> Eight days later the disciples were again together in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and examine my hands. Extend your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe."<sup>28</sup> Thomas replied to him, "My Lord and my God!"<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed."

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book.<sup>31</sup> But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

## They Are Forgiven

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: John 20:19-31

Last week the disciples didn't show up for Easter. Now we read in the Gospel of John that they were crouched behind locked doors, shivering in fear, expecting that they, too, might be discovered and face the same fate that Jesus had. What a great bunch of guys Jesus hired! Shuddering no-shows right to the end.

But this morning the plot takes a sharp turn. The disciples are hiding. Jesus comes through the locked doors and appears before them. Before they can respond, before they can worry that he has come to rebuke their failure, he says, "Peace be with you." Then he shows them his wounds. A light bulb goes on. Somehow, what they had misunderstood throughout their time with him came clear. They rejoiced.

It's easy to miss the dramatic turn of events. We're familiar with the ending. And even more, the crucifixion has become so much a part of our vocabulary that we may glide right by its meaning. To his followers, indeed to his executioners, Jesus' crucifixion was defeat. It wasn't just defeat; it was shameful defeat. Crucifixion was a death that on several counts offended Jewish sensibility and Jewish law. Paul tells us that crucifixion was a scandal, a stumbling block to the Jews. The Romans knew what they were doing.

So when Jesus broke into the room of the woebegone disciples and showed them his wounds, he was asking them to believe what they had for so long failed to believe, what they had fought so hard to disbelieve: that a crucified, suffering Lord could be the Messiah. It went against every instinct they had. And yet, this second time around, they understood immediately.

It's not unlike an alcoholic or a drug addict, who is addicted and will not see the truth. Friends and family members may try to help. Drug counselors may try to help. But sometimes, it is only when they hit rock bottom, when the lies that they tell themselves – I can handle this, I can quit whenever I want, I can do my job, it doesn't really affect my performance – when things get so bad that the lies utterly fail, when the family and the job and the self-respect are gone, when they are in a locked room trembling in utter fear and defeat, they finally may be able to let go of the rationalizations and look the truth in the face.

The disciples, it seems, had come to such a place. Even though he had tried to tell them differently, they had stubbornly held on to the notion of the Messiah who would come with a chariot and a sword. They had been addicted to such a notion and such a victory. They had been resolute. Peter had even tried to convince Jesus himself. But now, now, every dream of that kind of victory was shattered. In defeat, they were open to see things in new ways. Jesus showed them his wounds, and suddenly the evidence of the crucifixion became evidence of resurrection rather than defeat. In a flash, the scales on their eyes fell, and they understood. Indeed, they rejoiced. The risen, crucified Jesus offered them peace, and this time they were able to receive it.

And then, the story moves to another level of depth. At this prescient moment Jesus

gives the disciples but one instruction. “Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you. ... If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.” Jesus tells the disciples that he is sending them out to forgive sins. It would be hard to overestimate how profoundly different from the culture, how profoundly different from natural inclinations is the direction in which Jesus is sending the disciples. Indeed, even now Jesus’ followers miss the point with frequency.

Many Christians interpret Jesus’ statement, “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained,” to mean that Christians get to decide which sins are forgivable and which are unforgivable. Many Christians think that this sentence from Jesus gives them the right, even the obligation, to say who is condemned to hell. The sign protesting gay marriage that says, “God hates you,” is a pointed example. And while those of us more to the left may use less blatant language, we, too, are happy to delineate the sheep and the goats. You can recognize the sheep easily. They’re on our side.

The interesting thing is that when we think like this, we are being exactly like the disciples were before the lightbulb went on. We’re caught up in winning and settling scores. Throughout Christian history, this mistake has caused blood and tears enough to soak the earth. Pope Urban II launched the Crusades believing that they were the way to deliver Christ the victory. George Bush says, “God bless America,” and seems to mean that we are on the side of God, and that we are charged with bringing God the victory.

One of the hardest thing for most Christians to believe is that Jesus meant it about loving our enemies and forgiveness. Many of us say, Well, that’s alright for Jesus, but I’m not Jesus. Or, that turn the other cheek stuff is fine for Sunday School, but you sure wouldn’t want to try to live your life like that. Some caution that it is dangerously idealistic. Let’s be realistic, they say. You can have forgiveness as a religious ideal, but it will utterly fail if you try to bring that kind of idealistic thinking to the affairs of the world. Others make a slightly greater effort. They say that they will forgive, but they won’t forget. But, of course, that is nothing more than another way of saying that they won’t forgive at all.

But Jesus actually means what he says. And Jesus is up to something much more subtle and sophisticated than may at first be apparent. “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.”

When Jesus returned to the disciples in Jerusalem that day he was there to finally convince them that the things they had not thought possible were not only possible, but they were the only true way, the only way that actually works. A crucified Lord corroded their idea of Christ the victor. It was meant to. The pierced body made them accept that salvation, whatever that meant, came through one whose death had been a shameful defeat, not through the victories they had imagined. They saw, standing before them, incontrovertible evidence that the whole way they thought the world worked was completely wrong. This is why Thomas wouldn’t believe the other disciples’ reports. To believe them was to turn his world upside down. He wouldn’t believe until he saw the evidence. If shame could become resurrection, then nothing of what they had thought could be secure. It would mean, it did mean, that everything they had feared turned out to be benign. Everything they had valued and strived for turned out to be poison.

And what poison they had lived by. Anger and unwillingness to forgive are kissing cousins. Fred Buechner hits it squarely on the head when he says, “Of the seven Deadly Sins,

anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel of both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

The skeleton is you. That which you thought would give you life, strips the very flesh from your bones. Recompense, revenge, settling the score seduce you and then leave you in utter desolation. That which you had been sure would be glorious leaves you in Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones.

Then comes the other side of the equation. It’s maybe even harder to believe. Is it true, can it be true that forgiveness, love, non-violence can actually work?

I was riveted, like many of you, I imagine, by the reports of Kai Leigh Harriott at her court appearance in Boston a week ago Thursday. Kai testified at the hearing of a man who had shot and paralyzed her. “5-year-old Kai Leigh Harriott looked up from her blue wheelchair in the hushed courtroom ... and faced the man who fired the stray gunshot that paralyzed her nearly three years ago.

“‘What you done to me was wrong,’ the dimpled girl with purple and yellow plastic ties in her braids said softly. ‘But I still forgive him.’

“On a summer night in 2003, Anthony Warren of Hyde Park fired three gunshots into the air outside a three-decker in Dorchester to scare two women who lived on the first floor after an argument. One bullet severed the spine of Kai, then 3, who was sitting outside on her family’s third-story porch with a sister, singing “Down by the Bay” from the “Barney” television show.

“In emotionally wrenching victim-impact statements that left many spectators in tears, Kai and four members of her family told a Suffolk Superior Court judge that the shooting had changed their lives forever, but had also shown them the value of forgiveness.

“Moments later, Warren, 29, a convicted felon who pleaded guilty to avoid a trial, approached Kai and her family and, in barely audible tones, apologized, ‘I’m sorry for what I’ve done to you and your family,’ she said Warren told her. ‘I was known in the street for all the wrong reasons, and now I want to be known for the right reasons.’

“Tonya David shook his handcuffed right hand and embraced him.

“Superior Court Judge Margot Botsford called the statements the most moving she had heard in 17 years on the bench.” [Boston Globe, April 14, 2006]

The local television news stations used the opportunity to interview people on the street, and asked them what they thought about the little girl and her forgiving the man who shot her. Some admired her, but others angrily refused to think it was right to forgive the man.

Out of the reports in the paper and on television two things were readily apparent. Those in Kai’s family and on the street who were moved to forgiveness had much lighter hearts than those who held fast to the anger. That is, those who forgave were themselves happier people. The others were in the process of devouring themselves at the feast, of turning themselves into skeletons.

The second thing that was apparent was the impact of the forgiveness on Warren, the shooter. Over the last several years violent street crime in Boston has increased once again. Most experts say that the increase is largely due to the release from prison of dangerous criminals whose sentences have been completed. For the most part, these criminals, these repeat

offenders are people whom neither society nor victims have forgiven. The system that incarcerated them sought justice and vengeance. It didn't offer any kind of forgiveness. And when the criminals were released, they were unchanged, or if they were changed, they were even more hardened. In Warren's case, he goes to prison as well. But he goes with a commitment, in his words, to become known for the right reasons. He has already been changed by the act of forgiveness, and there is reason to hope that the change will stick.

“If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained.”

It may just be that Jesus means to save us not by satisfying God's blood-lust for our sins, but by undercutting the whole system by which we confuse power and violence with the will of God. In Luke Jesus says at the crucifixion, “Forgive them for they know not what they do.” He means, of course, that those who are crucifying him are completely confused and wrong about what really works in the world. In our passage this morning, Jesus' appearance to the disciples huddling behind locked doors is an act of forgiveness of the disciples for their same failure. And then Jesus commissions them. “Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you.” And we are sent for the very same reason. “If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained.”

Jesus means this, not as pie in the sky, not as metaphor, not as an ideal. Jesus means that we are now to understand that while violence and vengeance and un-forgiveness will fail, and they always will fail, that forgiveness will not.

To believe in the resurrection, to believe that the crucified one was raised, to believe that the defeat of Good Friday wasn't really a defeat. Those things are a piece of cake to believe my friends. The whole point of it all may prove even harder to believe.

Paul Neuchterlein says it this way, “If we want to truly be challenged by something in which to believe, try believing that there is ultimately a nonviolent way to stop violence. Can we believe there's another kind of response to September 11 than to wield our full military might at terrorism?”

It is the question of our time. And the choice is ours. Are we to be the skeleton on the table, or are we to be the little girl in the courtroom whose heart beats with love? Are we to continue to continue the tried and true ways of the world that leave us bloody and fearful, or are we to take the way of Jesus seriously? Are we to forgive sins, or are we to retain them? Help us, O God, to choose the way of life. Amen.