

Sermon preached by
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at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
On April 8, 2018, The Second Sunday of Easter, Year B

It was Easter night, the first Easter night, and the disciples had locked their doors for fear of the Jews. Even if it were true that Jesus *had* risen from the dead, what did it matter, because he was no place to be seen, and they were without comfort, without direction, and without hope. They were angry at the authorities for the brutal murder of their Lord, and who knows what they were thinking about Judas, that so-called disciple who betrayed Jesus with a kiss. What's more, there were no longer twelve disciples that night but only ten, because Judas had killed himself and Thomas was no place to be seen. And so the ten locked up their doors and waited, afraid and unsure of where to go and what to do. Imagine! This – this was the beginning of the Church.

It is one week after Easter here today, and we have gathered together in this place; we haven't locked the doors yet, but some of us are scared, and some of us are filled with anger, and we are unsure of where to go and what to do. The global economy is uncertain, our nation's children live in fear of guns in their schools, the #MeToo movement has revealed a surprising level of abuse in high places. Imagine – at a time like this, we are supposed to be the Church.

And we *are* the church, and Christ comes to be with us, as Christ came to be with the disciples. He strides through our doors and declares to us as he declared to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. 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.

Jesus' directions are simple directions, yet they were enough to start a church and they are enough to sustain a church. Be at peace and forgive sins. Jesus didn't say anything about healing the sick or being good stewards or working for justice. His first words to his disciples were about forgiveness and peace.

Note that Jesus didn't say anything about forgetting. "Forgive and forget" is from Shakespeare, not the Bible. Jesus didn't say anything about forgetting because the wonderful thing about God is that God doesn't forget. God remembers our sins, forgives us anyway, and then asks us to do the same thing for each other: to remember the offense, and even if we have been badly hurt, to forgive each other just the same.

It is hard to forget, and sometimes we simply can't do it. There are wars going on in Syria and Afghanistan now. Various factions are fighting over various issues and every side feels justified. These wars can never end with military victory, because the factions can never forget their oppression and their suffering. Peace can never come until they choose forgiveness rather than war and become reconciled to each other anyway. Likewise, there is probably a war going on in some household in West Hartford because of a forgotten birthday or a remembered affair or some other offense with a life of its own. Jesus is not calling us to have holy amnesia about these things, but to remember them and then to remember that love is more important than any offense can ever be.

I went to visit a elderly woman recently, and in my prayer for her, I asked that she might know strength and God's healing. She closed her eyes soon after we prayed, and I thought she had drifted off or wanted me to go. But after a few minutes she opened her eyes and said, "I really don't want you to pray for me to live any more – because I am ready to die. I haven't always been ready," she continued, "but last month I said the *Our Father* and then I dozed off the way I do, and when I awoke, I heard my lips saying, 'God bless John.' 'God

bles John.' Since the day he left me, I have hated John for what he did to me and to my children, but now that I have forgiven him I can die in peace."

Jesus told the disciples, "Peace be with you. 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." In order to forgive each other, we have to receive the Spirit because we get so bound by our hurts and angers and resentments and jealousies that forgiveness comes hard to us and sometimes we can't forgive no matter how hard we try. But Jesus breathes the Spirit into us to give us the power to make more of life than revenge and retribution. Jesus commands us to forgive because if we do not forgive, we will never know peace.

If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them, Jesus says. What an amazing gift. Through sheer grace, we have been given the power to set others free. And if we do forgive someone, even if we give up a legitimate claim for retribution, then *we* no longer have to carry around our mental account books, calculating the number of apologies we are owed and judging whether our offenders have been sufficiently repentant for us to forgive them.

How often are we to forgive? Seventy times seven, says Jesus. Why? Because if we don't forgive, we will be bound by vengeance. To know peace, we must find something more important than holding onto family feuds and our own self-righteous egos. Jesus repeatedly asserts that we cannot be forgiven if we do not forgive, because the pride that keeps us from forgiving is the same pride that keeps us from accepting forgiveness.

Jesus does not promise that forgiveness will "work." Jesus does not say, "If you forgive your enemy, then he will stop being your enemy and love you." As a matter of fact, sometimes enemies take forgiveness as a sign of weakness and pummel you all the more. But we Christians are supposed to take that risk and forgive because forgiving others is our response to God's forgiving love for us.

Forgiving is one of the hardest things in the world to do, but when we fail to forgive our sister, our boss, our spouse, our child, our neighbor, we give them the power to hurt us. When we hold onto our antagonism, we carry a burden that eats away at us and keeps us from knowing peace.

Jesus came into the locked room and said, "Peace be with you. Forgive each other." Let me tell you two versions of a little story about peace and forgiveness. First. A teenager is late coming home, and his parents are frantic. When they see him walking up to the door, they start their tirade. "Where have you been? At least you could have called! Don't you know how worried we have been? You know this means you'll be grounded." The second version. A teenager is late coming home, and his parents are frantic. When they see him walking up to the door, they rush out and throw their arms around him. "Oh, Johnny, we love you so much! We have been so worried about you. We thought you might have been killed, and we couldn't stand it." And then they go inside and sit down and tell Johnny -- that they are going to ground him. The same story, the same outcome, but one story begins with forgiveness. You did wrong, Johnny, they say, and there are consequences, but we love you and we forgive you. Peace be with you. Peace be with you, Johnny.

The Church began with ten folks no better equipped to be disciples than you are and than I am. They were scared, and they were strengthened by Jesus' presence; they were unsure and they were made confident by Jesus' words when he told them all they needed to know: Be at peace with each other; forgive each other. We come to this altar this day to be fed with the very presence of our risen Lord, who says the same thing to us, as he said to the ten: Peace be with you. Forgive each other. Peace be in your world as you try to confront evil without waging war. Peace be in your families as you bind up what is broken and forgive each other. Peace be with you always.

