

From The Pastor

I pray the Easter grace is still stirring in your heart. Easter is not just one Sunday a year, but rather a new way of being in the presence and peace of Jesus through the power of his Spirit. Liturgically, the season lasts fifty days as we ponder the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, his Ascension, and finally, the feast of Pentecost. All this pondering is done in the Spirit and life of the new creation made present through the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Life is different now, and we are to move forward not only with the hope of heaven, but with a noticeable empowerment of love here and now.

Speaking of good works, I am most grateful for the many hands that planned, and prepared the church, altar, and liturgies for Easter. As much as we invite, often the same people year after year step up to the job of preparing for these busy days. New persons are always welcome. Thank you to all who helped. You did a great job. Many thanks to Maureen, the choir, and the bell ringers for their music, extra practices, and support of our liturgies. Good worship builds faith, and God is praised when faith is built up.

Today's gospel is a powerful one, packed with insight and new understanding in the Risen Christ. John, the gospel writer, presents the Resurrection of Jesus as the beginning of the new creation. This is not just a spiritual metaphor. We are a new creation in Christ Jesus. Our lives are different now because the slavery of our sin has been liberated in the redemptive love of the Cross.

Unaware and not understanding what resurrection from the dead could mean the disciples are in fear, locked behind closed doors. This is the stance of the old creation: fear, and locked in; not yet knowing the freedom of love and forgiveness. Presently, Jesus is in their midst, and speaks a new peace to the disciples and to the world. This is the peace of reconciliation, unity, and divine friendship. The new creation will no longer hold the old fears and the imprisonment of sin. Again, as if infusing this new reality into the hearts of those present, Jesus says, "Peace be with you".

A new day has begun, and a new birth is about to be given. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit". Notice the direct parallel from the first creation: 'and God blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.' The first 'man' (humanity) had died in his sins, but is now a new person in the power of the divine Spirit. With our sins forgiven, we are now empowered and called to forgive sins: "the sins you forgive are forgiven, the sins you hold bound, remain bound".

This is an essential identity that is ours in the new creation. We are forgiven, and our life is now secure in God. Too often we doubt this, or fail to realize how real and complete this forgiveness is. We embrace it as a concept, or a tenant of our faith, but emotionally we resist its truth in the face of our frustrating failures. We forget that the new breath of the Spirit blew upon us *before* these words are spoken. The old self will not trust these words, but the new self who knows and accepts the Holy Spirit will find power and peace in them. Knowing deeply how much we are forgiven, it becomes obvious that we can, and must forgive others.

Unforgiveness is a major block and hindrance to knowing the peace and power of the Holy Spirit. If we hold sins bound, *we* are held bound. This is a truth. Frequently, we hold ourselves unforgiven negating the freedom of the Spirit. We do this because we feel too sinful to be forgiven, or the sins are so old they seem unforgivable. We have never known the peace of God and cannot imagine it could apply to someone like me. These are the lies and the mind and the old self. But you are no longer old, now you share in the new creation of the Resurrection. If it includes anybody, it includes you as well.

Similarly, if we presume ourselves acceptable before the Lord, but hold another unforgiven, we remain bound up and the Spirit of peace will not be ours. Unforgiveness binds and holds a person away from the surpassing peace and power that is ours in Christ.

This should be the end of the reading, but it is not. The account of Thomas could stand alone as a reading by itself, but it does not. It may be connected here only as an example of the reality of the forgiveness Jesus has given. Thomas is often thought less of because of his questioning doubt, and seemingly rude insistence to have to touch the wounds of Jesus. Notice what Jesus does with the occasion. First, he offers no word of rebuke or disappointment. Second, he invites Thomas to see and touch all he had formerly doubted. Satisfied, he is called to believe and no longer doubt.

We are called to do the same. Believe and doubt no more. However, if you do doubt, this is not a bad thing. Bring your doubt to Jesus. Speak to him your need or your question. Speak from your heart to the heart of Jesus. Like Thomas, you too may have a personal encounter and response from Jesus. In the case of Thomas, doubt was a good thing. He is given faith in the most confirming and personal of ways. You are alive in the Spirit; claim what you have received in Christ.

Father John Esper