

John 20:19-31

WHEN GOD CAME BACK

In preparing last week's Easter sermon, I came upon this thought by John Claypool; and, while I didn't use the quote last Sunday, I found his words to be even more fitting for both the scripture lesson and sermon today.

He wrote (concerning Jesus' death and resurrection): I had to admit that if it had been in my power to raise my son back from the dead, it would never in a thousand years have occurred to me to send him back to the kind of creatures who had treated him this way. At that point, the miracle of the Easter event broke over me. It was not just the power of God that astonished me here – the ability to take something that had been killed and call it back to life again. That is amazing. But even more amazing is the patience and mercy of a God who would still have hope for the kind of creatures who had treated his only begotten Son that way. Three days after human beings killed him in cold blood, the word was out, not only that he was alive again, but that he was saying, "I go before you into Galilee. Let's keep on keeping on. Let's get back to the task of dispelling suspicion and reconciling the world back to the Father." That is the towering miracle of Easter that broke in on me that day. (The Preaching Event, pages 49-50)

We approach the gospel text for today and we too express utter amazement that God came back into the midst of the ones, who were closest to Jesus – his first disciples - who had followed him the past three years, and yet, who had betrayed him, denied him, and fled from him the night of his arrest, on the eve of his crucifixion and death.

John informs us that on the night of that first Easter, the disciples were hiding behind locked doors in the house where they were staying because of their fear of the Jews, which is a clear reference to the religious authorities. If those in power had seen to it that Jesus was executed on the cross, it was quite conceivable that those same persons of authority would come after Jesus' closest followers next.

I also wonder if the ten disciples (minus Judas and Thomas) were hiding in fear because of the startling news they had received earlier that day from Mary Magdalene that she had seen their Lord, who had been raised from the dead. I imagine the disciples were thinking, if what Mary had said were true, what would happen next? Would the risen Christ turn away from them and choose other disciples to carry on his message and ministry? Or, would the risen Jesus confront them? Would he ask, "After all that I did for you and, when I was hoisted high up on the cross to die, I looked out into the crowds and I didn't see any of you - where were you in my time of need? You call yourselves disciples?" How would Jesus act towards them when he encountered his disciples, who had disappointed, forsaken, and betrayed him? Would he scold or shame them or raise his voice in anger towards them? They had every reason to be fearful!

But what did Jesus do, instead? He came back to them! The risen Jesus somehow appeared among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then, he showed them his hands and sides where the nails and spear had pierced his flesh so that they could see and really know that it was

indeed their crucified Lord, who had been raised from the dead. Once again, Jesus said to his disciples, "Peace be with you." In other words, Jesus quickly put their hearts and minds at rest by saying, in so many words, "Don't be afraid. I forgive you. What happened in the past will stay in the past because I still want to be in relationship with you." It was to these very disciples, caught up in their despair, their guilt, and blaming one another, that Jesus came back to them and offered them peace. He gave them forgiveness. Their relationship with Jesus was resumed only because of Jesus' act of forgiveness of his disobedient, betraying, and hide-saving disciples.

Then Jesus told them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," and he breathed on them and imparted the Holy Spirit to them in order to carry out his ongoing mission. Just as Jesus had forgiven his own, he sent them forth with power to proclaim that forgiveness to others and to warn those, who were not penitent, that they were ignoring the mercy of God. The Apostle Paul said basically the same thing to the church at Corinth when he wrote: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:18, 20).

For some unexplained reason, Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to the other disciples the evening of Easter day. When the others announced, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas held off believing the good news unless he could see and touch the wounds Jesus had suffered due to the nails and the spear. A week later, God in Christ came back. The risen Lord again gave the disciples his peace, and then he turned to Thomas and offered him the proof he needed in order to believe. But Thomas had seen more than enough for he uttered the strongest confession of faith in all of John's Gospel saying, "My Lord and my God."

This story is one of many times in the Bible when God came back to God's people. God loves us all with a love that will not let go and refuses to leave us to our own devices. And, the good news for us is that God came back to us. God, through the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, opened our eyes, our hearts, and minds; God gave us faith and opened us up to embrace the truth concerning the risen Lord Jesus Christ. We have been blessed for we are numbered among "those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

God calls us to be Easter people, who trust in the risen Jesus, who receive forgiveness and are sent forth to proclaim God's forgiveness that is available to all. God uses us to scatter and plant the seeds of peace and forgiveness in the lives of others. In the Father's house are many rooms, and I take that to mean there is room enough for all. The table of our risen Lord and Savior extends from here to heaven, so there is plenty of seating available to all who will come and feast with the risen Christ. We are called to believe our risen Lord that we are forgiven and then we are sent into the world to go and offer the same to others.

Clarence Jordan was a farmer and a scholar, who held a doctorate in New Testament Greek. He was the founder of Koinonia Farm, which was a small but influential, interracial Christian community in southwest Georgia; he was the author of the Cotton Patch translations of the New Testament and numerous other books; and, he was also instrumental in the founding of Habitat for Humanity.

More than twenty-five years ago, Florence Jordan, the widow of Clarence, told Kyle Childress of the time about two weeks after she and Clarence had been kicked out of the nearby Baptist church because of their work across racial lines. She was in the kitchen when there was a knock on the screen door. A man from the church was there asking for Clarence. About that time, Clarence came up from working on a tractor and asked how he could help the fellow. The man said, "Clarence, I can't sleep at night, and I came to see if you could help. You see, I can't sleep because I keep hearing singing all night long. This singing goes on and on, and I think it's angels singing, Clarence. And do you know what they are singing? They are singing, 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?'" The man went on, "And, Clarence, I was there. I was there two weeks ago when we voted you out of the church. Clarence, can you help me? Will you forgive me?" Clarence put his hand on the fellow's shoulder and said, "I forgive you."

And the man began to weep. He said, "Will you ask the Lord to forgive me, too, Clarence?" And Clarence said, "No, I won't ask the Lord to forgive you for you, but I'll tell you what I will do. I will go with you while you ask the Lord to forgive you." And Florence Jordan said that Clarence and the man went out in the yard and knelt at the foot of an old oak tree (which she pointed to) and prayed together and were reconciled. They were reconciled to God and to one another.

When we receive forgiveness and when we point the way for others to experience forgiveness, then we are witnesses to the fact that God came back on Easter, that resurrection and reconciliation are offered to all, that Jesus Christ is Lord and that he wants to be in a loving and lasting relationship with all people for all eternity. Thank God that the risen Lord Jesus comes back to us even now at the table. Let us join him and all others there to feast on the bread of life and the cup of our salvation. Amen.

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