

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter April 11, 2021  
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*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Acts 4:32-35*

*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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "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."*

*But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

*A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. John 20:19-31*

When the doors of the church were locked for fear of the pandemic, a faithful band of disciples decided to study the Acts of the Apostles on Zoom. They wanted to find the peace of Jesus and breathe in the power of the Holy Spirit when the world around them appeared to be falling apart.

The upper room of the disciples became the Zoom room and they overcame their fear of technology and strange new virtual learning. They were not afraid to ask questions and say "I have no idea, but will look that up." They shared prayer concerns and laughter and great grace was upon them all. Lest we forget, we worship the living God and not even a pandemic is a barrier to the presence of the Holy Spirit!

What we learned together is that those earliest followers of Christ started out with faltering steps, grew strong and of one heart and soul, sharing everything. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. Yet, even these first followers found that life in community can be a challenge and that the church is only as perfect as its members, which is to say, it is not perfect. In reality, the scriptures are full of imperfect people, and full of churches that are not perfect either. We can relate to this in our personal lives as well. Being of one heart and soul is not always easy, especially when we have been unable to worship in the church. It's not easy when the pandemic has us locked in rooms with family and there is no peace to be found. Quarantining, like church, can be hard work!

Our Gospel text shows us another reason why it's so difficult for us to be of one heart and soul. It is the very evening of the resurrection, we find the disciples, all except for Thomas, locked in the house in fear. We often focus on Thomas in this story, but I am more interested in all those other guys who are huddled

in fear, locked behind closed doors. Because I think we have a perfect example here of the power of fear. All of the disciples loved, trusted, and followed Jesus. But the moment the situation changed, fear set in and that fear paralyzed the disciples.

We have all experienced this. Fear can stop us in our tracks if we let it. Sometimes it's helpful to remember a time when we got past our fear. Can you remember how it felt to learn to ride a bicycle? If fear had kept us from trying, we would never have experienced that shift from fear to joy and freedom as we took off peddling on our own, launched from the safe grip of our parents into the promise of wind in our faces and miles of roads to explore!

Life is full of things that can make us fearful. We may fear what will come next for our aging parents, fear the results of those tests the doctor just ordered, or fear that an important relationship is falling apart – name the fear in your life that has got you in its grip.

Even in the church, where we think things should be perfect, fear can hinder us. What if attendance declines? What if we don't get enough volunteers? What if there's not enough money in the budget to do the things we have always done before? What if people decide not to come back to church once the pandemic has lessened?

When we allow our fears to take over our thinking, whether in our personal lives or in the church, we become like the disciples locked in the house. They were afraid because everything had suddenly changed. Their leader was gone, the authorities were surely going to come after them next, and they had no hope. Fear made it all too easy to forget what Jesus had taught them.

The power of fear makes us hold on more tightly to what we have, it can make us defensive, and blind us to new possibilities. We can become locked into patterns of denial, a need to control, or complete inaction. Like the disciples, we are not immune from fear, we may not always trust one another, and we struggle to believe all that Jesus has promised. So what do we do with our fear? What will release us from its grip?

For the disciples and for us, what empowers us to overcome fear and nudges us out of our locked rooms and mindsets is the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus breathes on us, filling us with the power of the Spirit to move us out of locked rooms and into what Jesus has promised, and to believe that we can accomplish all that God has given us to do. And Jesus knows we need reminders. He had to speak peace to his disciples three times in this passage alone!

The good news is that Jesus overcomes locked rooms, Zoom technology, closed churches and even pandemics. There is no fear powerful enough to deter Jesus. Our lives are not perfect, our church is not perfect, the world is not perfect... but through the power of the resurrection we have been given great grace to live as believers with one heart and soul. Do we believe that?

Because God does not intend for us to stay locked inside with our fear. God breathes on us, filling us with the power of the Spirit that we might overcome our fears and go out to love, to serve, to forgive, to proclaim the risen Christ.

Jesus breathes the power of the Spirit on us when we study scripture together, when we worship and pray with one another, and when we serve others. Whenever we are afraid, whenever we doubt that God is in the midst of our current crisis, listen for the risen Lord to speak peace. Whenever we are challenged by change or disappointed in the imperfections of ourselves or others, listen for the risen Lord to speak peace. Because it is the risen Lord who will walk right into our locked-up lives with the power of the resurrection to breathe on us, fill us with the Holy Spirit, and conquer our fear.

Amen.