

John 20:19-31

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.

Forgiveness Changes Lives

Last week Elwin Wilson died, at age 72. He'd been known all his life for hate. There is a newspaper photo of Elwin Wilson when he was 20, smirking with delight, a crowd cheering his acts, and a well-dressed man wiping a raw egg from his hat. Police officers stand nearby, not reacting. Elwin Wilson is the man who threw the egg and wore the smirk, and the police never took any action, because the well-dressed man was black, Elwin Wilson was white, and the photo is from 1961, in South Carolina.

That same year, Elwin Wilson lurked outside the bus station in his home town, and when black and white college students known as the Freedom Riders arrived-- travelling together by Greyhound bus, intentionally breaking the laws of segregation -- Wilson viciously beat the black man who dared try enter the White's Only waiting room. This time the black man was offered a chance to press charges, but he chose not to. "I never held any bitterness or anger," said the black man. I just forgave and went on - that's what we did in the non-violence movement.

In the 1980's, Elwin Wilson still harbored his hatred. He was furious that a home in his neighborhood had been sold to the Andersons, an African American couple, so he threatened the broker who'd sold the house, and later hung a black doll by its neck from a tree at the end of his driveway. The Anderson children were the first to see it.

Wilson yelled racial insults at the black wrestler on his grandson's team, and in 1999, when his Baptist minister began encouraging more black participation, he left the church.

Elwin Wilson could not remember all the actions full of hate he'd done, there were so many. But in the last four years or so, as his health began to fail, he grew uneasy, convinced that haters aren't in heaven and even if he made it there, those he'd hurt would be there, too. Hate could not be the end game. He talked all this over with two buddies at the auto body and paint shop in town, and one, a part-time preacher, suggested they pray. Maybe God could help. They did so together for five minutes. When that prayer was over, Wilson said he felt a profound sense of peace, that he was no longer doomed. "It's not like I stopped cussing or anything," he says. "But I didn't feel the same hate." A week later, watching the inauguration of our country's first African American President on TV, he decided what to do, and called his local newspaper, saying he needed to apologize.

And he has, asking for forgiveness. The Freedom Rider he'd beaten up? Though Wilson had never known it, that was John Lewis, now a Member of Congress from Georgia. When Wilson sought him out in Washington, "They hugged like brothers," said Wilson's wife, and both cried. His neighbors the Andersons? They invited Wilson over to their house so together they could watch his televised apology.

He'd never expected all the national publicity. He just thought he needed to apologize in the local town paper, to reach those he'd hurt. When Elwin Wilson died, the story that was told was far different from what had once been expected in his obituary.

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When Jesus died, the story that was told in John's gospel is also far different from what would have been expected in his obituary, had it been written on Good Friday, also because of forgiveness.

Forgiveness re-writes lives.

Three endings must have seemed possible to the disciples by Easter evening, but none occurred. One ending – the one that they were panicked about, the one that caused them to lock the door – was that the government and religious powers that had killed Jesus would come after them next, to stamp out any remnants of Jesus' teaching. By their actions, it seems *this* story ending is what they most expected.

A second possible ending was that everything would eventually blow over: the Passover festival would end, crowds would dissipate from Jerusalem, and in a while all would slowly return to business as usual, the disciples fading back into their Galilean village life, remembering Jesus fondly, of course, trying as best they could to live the way he'd taught them. But nothing more. We wouldn't read of them today.

And this outcome – it was probably the disciples' best-case scenario that night, the one for which they may have prayed.

A third scenario – that Jesus himself would suddenly be with them, in that locked room? – I can't imagine that's what they anticipated. I don't even think it's what they most wanted. The biggest stumbling block wasn't their lack of belief – it would be hard for any of us to trust Mary Magdalene's report that she'd seen him alive again, wouldn't it? I've always had sympathy for Thomas, not derision.

The far greater reason the band of disciples would not be praying to see Jesus alive again is that they were deeply worried about what he would say to them, if he did appear. What would he do?

Have you ever been betrayed? Trusted someone and had them utterly let you down? If Jesus appeared, he'd have every right – every right – to scourge the disciples with his words, to flail them with his accusations: How dare you! You betrayed me when I needed you most. You are unworthy to be called my friend. I will find others who will honor God better. I can no longer trust you to deliver my message.

Have you ever felt justified in refusing to trust someone who failed you once, in refusing to work with them again, give them another chance, forgive them?

If ever there was anyone with that right, it was Jesus. Seeing Jesus again was NOT something for which the disciples yearned that night. They must have feared him, too, wondering how they could ever face him, with their bottomless shame.

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But Jesus rewrote this expected ending. He came and said to them, "Peace be with you." "Peace be with you." "Peace be with you." Jesus says it three times in the course of today's short gospel lesson. And he never says a word of blame. There is no condemnation.

Peace is what he most wanted for them - what God most wants for you and me. The deep peace that comes from forgiving and from being forgiven. From still being loved when you don't deserve it. From loving someone again when everything had been on the rocks. From putting all the bitterness behind, starting fresh.

Forgiveness changes everything. It changed the disciples, and propelled them out of their locked room, to tell everyone that they also could know this deep peace.

Jesus knew the power of forgiveness, so said to them that night, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Those who believe in church hierarchies and the special power of priests, think that with this statement Jesus was giving the apostles – and their successor priests - a special

power to hear confessions and absolve sins. But I don't hear Jesus' words that way. There does not need to be an intermediary between us and God to forgive our sins.

What Jesus said to the disciples about forgiveness applies to everyone, every person alive. We each hold astonishing power, when we choose to either forgive or not to forgive. When we choose NOT to forgive another person, we do bind that person; we enslave him or her. We enslave ourselves, too. But when we choose to forgive, we free them and us.

Have you experienced that?

The Dali Lama was told by his doctors, when he was age 67, that he had the physical heart of a 22 year old. Why? "I think because of my peace of mind," he said, that comes from the practice of forgiveness, the letting go of anger, which destroys your own peace of mind. (Victor Chan, 233-4)

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But what if you aren't a vicious racist, like Elwin Wilson, clearly needing to beg others' forgiveness, or like Jesus Christ and the Dali lama, extraordinarily able to grant it? What if your life is more full of greys – then how does forgiveness fit in?

When there may be things others hold against us, but we *know* we were doing the best we could. Or doing what we really still think was right. Others may have been hurt in the process, we know. But in this case do we need to say, "I'm sorry"? I'm sorry that what I did or said hurt you? Because, you see, we were doing the right thing!

Alternatively, perhaps we're the ones who were hurt. We do hold resentments against others, but to ignore what was done, would be foolish; it would allow the whole cycle to repeat itself, harming even more. People *can* lose our trust, and should. There is wisdom in protecting ourselves and others from unneeded pain.

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I know. I know! All that is my story, too. How can it not be, if we are human? We do so often swirl in a mist of greys, damp and chill like a fog, bumping up against one another, not quite seeing one another clearly – not seeing the full person who hurt us: what she was like as a little girl, what his mother used to say to him, what her spouse would call her, what the supposed friend once did. Neither does the one we hurt know us, how hard we really tried, our hopes and intentions, the way we fretted, who gave us poor advice....

It is a swirl of grey, of not quite seeing one another, of never getting the whole picture, of not enough sunlight shining in. All the conversations we never risk having. The crying together we don't do.

Jesus could forgive the disciples, at least in part, because he did know them so well – like parents who can excuse a child's acting out at night, when they know what grief surrounded the child earlier that day. Like old friends who bear with us over time, because they have our back story, lived out with us over the years.

Jesus understood his disciples very well– their strengths and their weaknesses, their fears and hopes – and from this understanding, he had compassion for them. Love and compassion and understanding – these are the things that let us tilt towards forgiveness. That let us, if we have any doubt at all, choose forgiveness. It's what the Freedom Riders were taught even before they set out on the buses – we will love those who hate us, because this movement is based on love.

Did you notice? Long before Elwin Wilson apologized to Congressman Lewis, Lewis had already declined to bring charges against Wilson, had forgiven him, and had moved on, though Wilson was still mired in his hate.

Oh the power of Love! The power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus gave that Easter Night to the disciples, that swirled around Elwin Wilson as he prayed in the auto body shop, that swirls around us, too, right here, right now. The power of Love, like sunshine, to burn off the grey fog, and let us see one another as brother and sister again.

No friends, very often it is *not* possible to forgive alone, based on what we can do, what we can know, alone in our human swirl of grey fog. But with God anything is possible. Fogs lift. Even lifelong hatreds lessen somehow. And endings to stories change when God enters in.... The photo atop Elwin Wilson's obituary last week was of him and his newfound brother, John Lewis, two men now in their seventies, each a little more worn and wrinkled, sitting close alongside one another, friends through to the end.

I don't know the ending to your story, as it would now be written. But I am convinced that there is no one, and nothing, that is beyond the power of God's love to heal and reconcile. Because really, what could that be, that is beyond the power of God's Love to heal and reconcile?

Jesus intended his words to be heard by us all today, in whatever locked rooms of fear or worry we hide : *Peace* be with you. *Peace* be *with* you. *Peace* be with *you*!

Alleluia! Amen.