

## Gospel - John 20: 19-31

### Easter 2

Sermon 4.11.21

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Jesus comes into the room and declares to his disciples, **“Peace be to you.”** They are stunning words of absolution.

I have been trying think of ways for you to connect with your new rector during these days of isolation. Then I had this idea. I invite you to share with me any and all of your burnt holiday baked goods that no one else wants to be eating.

My Norwegian grandma had this wonderful practice of burning her crinkly molasses cookies so deliciously perfect. They came out of the oven black on the bottoms and crispy throughout, and it makes my mouth water just to describe them. Heavenly.

When Lynn was a teenager she offered up to me a bag of home- made burnt peanut butter cookies. No one else wanted to eat them. I am definitely not a fan of soft peanut butter cookies. But these were so burnt and oh so amazing and delicious!

I can think of only one thing better, and that’s the taste of fresh cookie dough rolled in sugar; or else raw ends of a cinnamon roll that are too small to go into the oven. Those raw ends, those rolled pieces of dough—they are just a foretaste of such wonderful goodness to come!

Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

But this happens some forty days before the day of Pentecost and outpouring of the Spirit described in the book of Acts.

The Holy Spirit is called a foretaste of heaven and the earnest money or down payment of our eternal inheritance. But today’s reading more describes a foretaste of the foretaste and an earnest of the earnest.

Think about this way:

God’s full kingdom revealed involves all of the fresh cookies you could ever desire or imagine. (I’ll take the burnt ones, thank you.)

The Pentecostal outpouring in the book of Acts is when you receive a single pan of fresh (burnt) cookies, right from the oven.

But today when Jesus breathes out his Holy Spirit, that’s when you only get a small taste of cookie dough, all rolled in sugar.

They are “the gifts of God for the people of God.” And oh, what amazing gifts! Forgiveness, especially. Jesus says, *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*

You can clearly see in today’s reading how Jesus joins two seemingly different concepts together as one. First he says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Next he says, “I am granting you the power of forgiveness.”

In the book of Matthew Jesus says, “I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

I say again, what amazing gifts are the gifts of the Spirit and forgiveness, both received and then shared!

Luther’s Small Catechism refers to these gifts as “The Office of the Keys”; Luther says:

*I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they . . . absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.*

During morning worship the words of absolution are amazing to me. Metaphorically speaking, they taste like the best burnt cookies I can ever imagine. Whenever I get to declare the absolution, I consider it the most important priestly activity that I do, second only to making an invitation to the Lord’s Table.

When I was growing up, the Declaration of Absolution sounded like this:

“Almighty God, our heavenly Father, hath had mercy upon us, and hath given his only Son to die for us, and for His sake forgiveth us all our sins. To them that believe on his name He giveth power to become the sons of God, and hath promised them His Holy Spirit. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. Grant this, Lord, unto us all.”

In the Prayer Book the most common Declaration follows our customary confession of sins:

“Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. *Amen.*”

In the liturgy of “The Reconciliation of a Penitent” the words of Absolution are even stronger:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive you all your offenses; and by his authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*”

Then the priest declares, “The Lord has put away all your sins.”

And the penitent says, “Thanks be to God.”

It is one thing for a priest to say it; it is another thing for us to receive it. It was one thing for Jesus to breathe the Spirit; it was another thing for his disciples to receive the Spirit.

But whenever we do receive it, when we really know within our being the full extent to which forgiveness pertains to every part of us, then our entire world and everything we can perceive is eternally changed all around us everywhere.

I follow a particular daily meditation, and one of the daily readings (Lesson 155) begins as follows:

“There is a way of living in the world that is not here, although it seems to be. You do not change your appearance, though you smile more frequently. Your forehead is serene; your eyes are quiet.”

You change the way you look at things; and when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change. You live in the world, yes, but your heart is not here. Your heart is in heaven and set on things above.

Even so, I like the idea of the disciples being skeptical and unbelieving about Jesus’ resurrection. That gives me hope. Jesus loves the skeptic and the unbelieving.

They say that emotional intelligence begins with you’re being able to name your emotions, so as I prepared for this message I read through all of John 20 in order to pick out the different positive and negative emotions that in the passage.

On the positive side are emotions of peace, gladness and trust. In fact three times Jesus says, “Peace be to you,” probably because that is what his disciples most needed to hear.

On the negative side are emotions of sorrow (or weeping), fear and skepticism—and all for good reason. Their teacher, a perceived threat to the social and political and religious orders, has just been crucified. It wasn’t at all clear if they might now be subject to the same fate. So according to John they were sad, unbelieving and especially afraid.

According to Luke they were also critical or judgmental. They scorned Mary and the other female witnesses as reporters of so much nonsense. It says, “These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (24:11).

Fear and criticism are two sins that can most penetrate and plague us and have us all twisted in on ourselves and cut off from ability and freedom to love God, our neighbor and each other. They are two sins from which we especially are in need of both deliverance and absolution.

Judgmentalism toward others can be especially insidious on account when other people’s sins are so blatantly apparent, particularly when it involves someone who offends us or we plain just don’t like. We place ourselves in a role of comparison. We think—we know!—we are better than they are; like: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11).

From childhood we say, “It takes one to know one,” and that saying is entirely true.

Paul repeats the idea in a wordier way in the book of Romans when he says, “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things” (2:1).

Between the lines in today’s reading you can feel the other disciples judging of Thomas for his resistance to believe in the risen Jesus, when only a week prior they had all been guilty of fear and hardness and unbelief and a heart turned in on itself.

Jesus does not wait for them to be all prepared and ready before he pronounces his peace and absolution. Jesus bursts into the room according to his own good pleasure and says, “Peace be to you” and breathes on them the Holy Spirit. In that moment their lives are changed—forever, and for good.

It is a good thing for us whenever we sing in prayer, “Just as I am, without one plea . . . , O Lamb of God, I come.” Or else we sing, “Not my brother, not my sister, but it’s me, O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer.” But our Jesus doesn’t wait till we think we are ready enough, thank God! He is ready to pronounce peace and forgiveness and to breathe and impart the freedom of his Spirit regardless of our own felt state of readiness. Today’s Gospel reveals that peace and joy are never far away. We only need to listen and to receive: “Peace be to you.”

It is as much to say,

“Almighty God, who is rich in mercy, has given his only Son to die for us, and for his sake God forgives us all of our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ and by his authority alone, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all of your sins. May God strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. *Amen.*”

Then we are changed. Then we are renewed. Then we are free.

Then we are raw, rolled cookie dough, rolled in sugar, as yet unbaked, but ready to bake; good to the taste, a moist pleasant foretaste of the baked or burned cookies that are yet to be revealed from the oven. Amen.