

## **“Greatly Gracious”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

April 4, 2021 – Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31

What were they expecting, these disciples of Jesus as they hunkered down together in fear behind closed doors with the resurrected Christ appearing among them? Mary Magdalene had already spoken with Jesus outside of the garden tomb earlier that Easter morning, and she reported this to the other disciples, but did they believe her? And as Jesus came to them and stood before them, what did they think he might say or do in their presence? Perhaps they quivered in fear more by the presence of Jesus among them than they did from the religious and political leaders from which they were hiding; after all, just a few days prior to this appearance of Jesus in their midst, they had disappeared from his midst when he needed them most, scattering and hiding when he was arrested. Perhaps Peter considered his own failure to even acknowledge that he knew Jesus when confronted, denying three times that he was Jesus’ disciple. Perhaps they expected to receive harsh words of condemnation, rebuking them for their unfaithfulness.

Whatever they were expecting, they did not receive condemnation from their resurrected teacher. In the words of Kate Matthews, former dean of the Amistad Chapel at the UCC headquarters in Cleveland, “there were no recriminations, no anger, no condemnation or judgment, not even an understandable expression, or ‘venting’, of disappointment and hurt.” No, the only venting of Jesus that evening was his breathing upon them and his offering of a word of peace. “Peace be with you,” Jesus said, and then he reminded his followers of their mission, to go outside of the safely locked room, just as Jesus had

left the sealed tomb, to offer words of peace to the world. And as he breathed on them, offering them his Spirit, he gave them all they needed to overcome their fears and doubts and to venture forth in faith to proclaim their message. According to the Book of Acts, which we heard just moments ago, the disciples received “great grace” whenever they gathered, and at this gathering on the evening after Easter, the great grace that was upon them was a word of peace, a calling to share that word, and the empowering presence of God to do so, so that they could be greatly gracious themselves in sharing God’s peace.

And what is this peace that was breathed upon the disciples? What is the peace that they were to breath upon others?

This peace was not simply an absence of hostility or trouble, such as the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, a sense of stability that came to the Empire through their crushing of opposition or dissent. No, the peace of Christ is not the absence of hostility or trouble or the removal of something or someone that causes these things.

I grew up in a household as the youngest of three brothers, which were not always at peace with one another. While we didn’t have too many colossal wars between us, there were plenty of shouting and wrestling matches. And our long-suffering mother would often beg us for some “peace and quiet,” which, from time to time, we were miraculously able to offer to her and one another.

While finding some “peace and quiet” is good, especially for parents of noisy, quarrelling siblings, “quiet” often does not go hand in hand with the “peace” that God offers us and calls us to offer to the world. For God’s peace is neither the absence of noise or hostility, but is the presence of goodness and a sense of well-being even amidst the noisy, messy troubles of life.

At times, this kind of peace, and sharing it, requires *making* some noise. Kristin Johnson Largen, Lutheran minister and president of Wartburg Theological Seminary in Iowa, describes this peace of Christ as being that which “brings back into the fold the outcast and the marginalized, and turns upside down the societal conventions of first and last, blessed and cursed, rich and poor. Jesus’ peace invites the lion to see the lamb as neighbor and friend, the Jew to speak with the Samaritan and the prostitute to dine with the Pharisee.” This kind of peace is often not quiet; rather, it can be quite loud. And it often provokes a non-peaceful response of opposition or rejection from those who are threatened by it.

But this is the word of peace, the great grace, that has come to us and that we are enabled to offer to others.

And so receive the gift of God’s peace. You are not condemned by God for your failures. Let God overturn your condemnation of yourself. As the body of the resurrected Christ was still marked and marred by wounds, your brokenness may leave lasting scars, but you can be transformed even while bearing those scars. So take in the Breath of Christ and be empowered to move beyond your brokenness and your doubt that God is able to bring you healing and transformation.

And step out in faith in offering this transforming peace to the world. Be greatly gracious in your peace-making work. And make some noise to enact justice, for until there is more justice for all, there will not be enough peace for all. Let God work through you to bring healing and wholeness to a broken world, and let us together be renewed in our efforts to be the Easter people that continue God’s work of transforming our communities by love. Amen.