

Hear the Easter story from John, Chapter 20:

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, 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.”

Resurrection. Locked Doors. Holy Spirit Breath. Peace. Sent. Forgiveness.

These few verses in John’s gospel are disturbing and compelling. Jesus is resurrected but the disciples don’t yet know it, or don’t believe it. Witnessing the gruesome, public crucifixion of the one in whom they hoped was a trauma that sent them into hiding. They weren’t hiding out of paranoia. The bloody murder of Jesus evidenced what powers do, whether through oppressive government or pernicious religion. Let’s be clear when reading scripture and we come across words like “for fear of the Jews,” it means “for fear of the pernicious Jewish leaders.” Verses like this are misused to perpetuate anti-Semitism and create space for hate... the kind of hate we know all too well that can lead to murder or even genocide. John’s gospel is pointing to Jewish leaders conspiring with the Roman government to destroy Jesus.

A few weeks ago, the Western North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church hosted a Peace Conference at Lake Junaluska. A captivating speaker, engaged in the Irish Peace Process, was Rev. Dr. Gary Mason, a Methodist pastor who founded and directs the Belfast-based conflict transformation nonprofit “Rethinking Conflict.” Still echoing in my heart and mind is a statement Dr. Mason asserted in his strong Irish brogue, saying, “Incomprehensible acts become comprehensible... when committed in conjunction with religion.” I am haunted by that statement, “Incomprehensible acts become comprehensible... when committed in conjunction with religion.” To what incomprehensible acts have we become desensitized, church? We are resurrection people staring at the violent crucifixion of Jesus and hearing of his followers scared, hidden, behind locked doors. Yet, we applaud linguistic violence by the leaders of the public square and the pulpit which ultimately leads to incomprehensible acts.

So many groups of people are scared, hidden, and behind locked doors today because of the evidence of incomprehensible acts. Trans persons are afraid to travel because of

the violence and vitriol unleashed over trans persons banned from military service. Immigrants are scared and hidden for fear of being swept up in raids, regardless of their status. People who don't speak English are terrorized. LGBTQ persons are threatened by hate groups who are emboldened by toxic religion. The poorest people among us have been stripped of support for childcare, healthcare, and food, while simultaneously those of us with access to resources are more concerned that our retirement accounts have plummeted. People who haven't had the privilege of a pension plan are facing homelessness, hunger, and job loss. Let's collectively turn our attention to those with no safety net, no reserves, no savings accounts, no privilege. The threats facing the voiceless and the powerless need to unnerve us. There are incomprehensible acts becoming comprehensible because of oppressive government and pernicious religion.

This first Easter story ignites us to receive the power of the Holy Spirit and sends us to the world to find all who are hidden in fear behind locked doors and extend peace. Jesus' resurrection breaks the power of sin of the oppressor. Jesus' resurrection emboldens the Church to see and name the oppression of so many in hiding. Not one denomination, but the entire church, the universal church, celebrates resurrection that breaks chains and overthrows oppressive powers.

Easter 2025 marks an infrequent gift! While the Eastern and Western churches typically use different calendars leading to varying Easter dates. In 2025, both calendars will result in Easter falling on the same date. The alignment of the lunar cycle that determines the date for Easter on both the Julian and the Gregorian calendar means that the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Church will celebrate Easter on April 20, 2025. Let's not miss this opportunity to focus on the unity of the church. Naming that there is an Eastern Church and a Western Church is a reminder that the church has a long history of conflicts and splits - as well as a long history of being the oppressor with toxic religion in concert that creates hate and violence. Easter disrupts hate. Easter disrupts division. Jesus slips in saying, "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."

Peace is extended and the disciples are sent. Peace is not given so the disciples can stay hidden and comfortable. Peace is extended to catapult them toward others hidden, oppressed, afraid... longing for peace. And Jesus knows our limitations. He gives a gift. Connected to the power of the Holy Spirit is the capacity to forgive. We cannot "release" someone through forgiveness apart from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Remember that "releasing" someone through forgiveness is not disregarding the

offense. Forgiveness does not halt measures of accountability nor the consequences that ensue. Forgiveness is the Holy Spirit's work in us. Forgiveness releases the perpetrator to God so the perpetrator's sin isn't retained in the heart of the injured, causing more harm. Unforgiveness never hurts the perpetrator. It only holds captive the injured. "If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

May Christ's Resurrection break the chains of unforgiveness, break the chains of oppressive powers in government and in the church, and give peace to all who are injured, traumatized, and oppressed. If you are one who is in hiding for fear, the resurrected Jesus, has come, comes to us even now, and is coming to you extending Peace. May the love of God, the peace of Christ Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit comfort, keep, and send you from the locked doors of fear into the fields of faith where God is at work offering life and love. Amen.