

2 Easter YB 2024

Hold Fast
By the Rev. Salying Wong

The egg hunt is over; the chocolate is eaten. But, in church, it is still the same day as last Sunday. It's just that it is now evening.

Last Sunday, it was the morning. On Sunday morning, the first day of the week, in the Gospel of John, Mary alone went to the tomb and found it empty. She told the disciples the disturbing news, and a couple of them ran to the tomb and indeed saw that it was empty. Then they went and locked themselves at home in fear. Mary lingered at the tomb, weeping. Then Jesus appeared to her and commissioned her to tell the disciples. Mary told the disciples that she saw the risen Jesus.

Today, we continue to hear about the story. Now, it is evening of that same day. Even though Mary had told them she had seen the risen Jesus, the disciples locked themselves in the house, "for fear of the Jews." Before I proceed with the rest of the sermon, I want to make note about this phrase, "for fear of the Jews." The disciples were Jewish and so was Jesus, so this fear of the Jews was not of Jews in general. In fact, the community composing the Gospel of John were also Jews. But they were kicked out of the synagogue because of their claims about Jesus. So, in the Gospel of John, we need to keep in mind that the term "Jews" stands for the Jewish religious leaders who disagreed with them about Jesus. John's community felt persecuted by them.

But the disciples are afraid of more than persecution. In the non-canonical *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, we hear that after Mary told the disciples that she saw Jesus, they openly dismissed her, saying, "Why would the risen Lord appear first to a woman?!" In the Gospel, Mary decides they're useless and leaves to be a missionary. If this were the case, then Mary might have left before evening, when

Jesus appears to the disciples. The community was already breaking apart. They were not one, as Jesus had told them to be. Dismissing the authority of women was a way the disciples covered up their actual fear: that what Mary said was true. Maybe they were afraid that Jesus was actually alive and would come to rebuke them for running away when things got tough. Judas wasn't the only one who betrayed Jesus. Consider it: If you betrayed someone, would you be happy to share the same room with them? Most of us would not like to be reminded of our failure. It is easier to blame or dismiss - a well-used method for discharging discomfort.

Jesus said to them, *Perfect Love casts out fear*. The perfect love of God is still coming for them, even in the locked room, even as evening settles not just outside, but in their hearts and they are losing their way. When Jesus comes this evening, he confirms the truth: For God so loved the world that he sent his son. Jesus comes for them even after death. And when he does, he does three things: declares peace with them, gives them the Holy Spirit, and teaches them about forgiveness. All three of these things - the peace of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and forgiveness are interrelated. The peace they receive is a peace that overcomes their fear and their failure. The Holy Spirit is given to them to help them take up this peace, to help them receive it. The Holy Spirit draws their attention away from fear and turns them toward love and grace. It is this Holy Spirit that will teach them the third thing, how to be agents of forgiveness in a world in great need of it.

According to the NRSV translation, Jesus tells 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." (20:23) But, the Greek actually doesn't have the word "sins" in the second half of the verse. I can explain this with punishing detail about Greek grammar. However, you might take the renowned biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders' word for it. She translates this verse as this: *Of whomever you forgive the sins, they (sins) are forgiven to them; whomever you hold fast (embrace), they are held fast*. Notice that the first half of the verse is about sins, but the second

half is not about holding fast to sin, but holding fast to people. Translated this way, the disciples are not commissioned to judge people and hold onto their sins.

Instead, there is something beautiful here. The disciples are to share the resurrection ministry with Jesus in forgiving sins and embracing people – just as Jesus has done for them. He comes in the midst of their failures, declares peace, forgives them, and embraces them to himself. This is what he does for Thomas. When he doubts, Jesus holds him fast and takes him into his wounded body, and shows him that even so, there is warmth and love waiting for him.

The Gospel of John's concluding remarks are for the rest of us. When we have a hard time, not just with believing, but with forgiving others and ourselves, Jesus declares to us peace, gives us the Holy Spirit to woo us toward grace instead of fear, and in doing so, we share with Jesus the resurrection ministry of forgiving one another. Andrew when things get tough, to hold fast to each other.