Sermon on Easter 2 2019
(John 20:19-31)

It usually takes me a couple of weeks to recover from the impact of Holy Week.

Unfortunately, when I say recover, I don’t mean just recover from being tired; I mean recover after having experienced something so good, so potentially powerful, that I’m not sure what to make of it or expect from it and so I default to the “normal” as a way of coping.

I’m somewhat reassured when I read the post-resurrection accounts in the Gospels. For the most part they exude this same strange combination of exultant wonder and a pulling back into routine.

The followers of Jesus are so beside themselves with joy because Jesus is alive that they don’t know what to do so they go back to fishing, their original occupation.

One could say that the entire history of the Church has been an experiment in how best to narrow the gap between the awesome inbreaking of God’s Kingdom in the death and resurrection of Christ and the ordinary lives we live.

Maybe a better way of putting it is that Christian Spirituality is all about how to draw our ordinary lives into the orbit of this “new thing” that God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ.

With that in mind the Church has set aside the seven weeks of the Easter season that we might ponder and practice resurrection with the hope that each year we’ll “recover” from our wonder more slowly.

If you’ll allow me to riff on this as a metaphor; what the Church proposes is that we develop a case of “resurrection” that becomes increasingly resistant to the antibodies of the world’s systems. That we become, each year, more infected with its wonder; that our former lives, that the routines and necessities of life are infected too.

How does this ultimately positive and good disease, this dis-ease with “getting back to normal” happen?

We all know about Lent and the practices of penitence, prayer and almsgiving that mark it, practices that orient our lives to repentance, to an openness to change our minds about those patterns in our lives which are harmful.

What we don’t do nearly as well is develop resurrection practices that help us live from the wonder and expectancy born of the great Easter surprise.

Attention to our stories can help but only if we understand them in a certain way; only if we understand them as more than “merely” accounts of what happened long ago.

Only as they become stories that are still happening among us and to us can they function as sources that help us live our ordinary lives in light of resurrection astonishment and inform our mission as a community that transfers not certainty, not “we’re right,” but wonder, but invitation!

This week’s gospel reading is assigned to Easter 2 for all three years of our lectionary. It is so foundational and so basic we can say that we’ve not understood resurrection at all unless we grapple with it’s message.

Let’s remind ourselves of the context; in John’s gospel the first recorded appearance of the resurrected Christ is to Mary Magdelene in the garden close to the tomb. She becomes in affect, as the Church has called her, the apostle to the apostles when she announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.”

On that same evening, the disciples are meeting in a house; all the doors are locked because the disciples in their terror are convinced that it’s just a matter of time before the religious leaders, who’ve rid themselves of Jesus, or so they think, come looking for them and try to get rid of them as well.

Right after explaining about the locked doors John says simply “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”

No explanation as to how this was possible, just the juxtaposition of the way the world is with its locks and terrors and New Creation with its apparently open doors but still fresh terrors.

And so the first word this Awesome, shocking, world-shaking presence speaks is “Peace,” here, a formal greeting, but something also meant to quell their fear.

The word “Peace,” one of the most important words in the Hebrew scriptures, enfolds the ideas of forgiveness, healing, order, harmony; in short: a new community of possibility.

Jesus shows them his wounds, not as an act of recrimination, not as a victim impact statement: “Look what your cowardice, your complicity did!” but as an act of reconciliation.

Their joy is so powerful at this point that again Jesus says “Peace be with you.” “By these wounds I’ve created a new community, indeed a new world!”

“And there’s more, out of your joy I’m sending you on a mission; you’re going to help establish this peace, this new community in the world just as I’ve been doing.”

And then the new creation that happens to Christ in his resurrection is tangibly passed on for he breathes on them the Holy Spirit; the word breathe is the same word in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures when in Genesis chapter two God breathes into Adam the breath of life and he becomes a living being.

Christ breathes into the Church the possibility—the Holy Spirit!—of tangibly living his resurrection life.

As we’ll see Her very first manifestation in the community is what he’s just done for the disciples: come amongst them as a reconciler, as a forgiver, as someone who doesn’t hold their complicity with evil against them.

Immediately after “breathing” the Holy Spirit into them he says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

In the structure of the story this becomes the founding command, acting as the New Creation equivalent to God’s “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” in the in original creation story.

Eugene Peterson paraphrases it like this “If you forgive someone’s sins they’re gone for good. If you don’t forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?”

This is how we practice resurrection; we practice reconciliation. If this is what Jesus’ resurrection accomplishes for all who follow him than it makes sense that this is a major mark of our mission. We practice this with one another; we help each other be reconciled in all the mundane and difficult ways this needs to be worked out in our lives.

The disciples practice reconciliation with Thomas eight days after they’re given the commission. Thomas is invited into the disciples’ gathering even though he doesn’t believe.

It’s not our job to convince anybody of the truth of Christ; our job is to invite and include. Christ is quite capable of convincing the obdurate, that’s the polite word for stubborn, inflexible, pig-headed or mulish.

All of us begin our faith journeys at different points; all of us struggle with different issues, sins and hang-ups.

The resurrection possibilities in this inclusion of Thomas for a typical Anglican parish are captured beautifully in an episode aired several years ago now on a CBC show called 180 in which the story was shared of Doug Turner, life-long atheist, from an atheist family of several generations who came to faith in Christ at St. Barnabas Anglican, diocese of New Westminster and was baptized at the Great Vigil of Easter in 2012.

Doug was 72 at the time of his baptism and had started attending St. B’s 15 years previously. A life-long Marxist, he used to say to his kids when they were growing up, “the only thing against my religion is religion; it’s all a bunch of hypocrites.”

But then as he moved into his fifties he started coming to the Church with his wife, attracted by the opportunity to volunteer for some of the outreach ministries.

Over time, as he puts it, the Holy Spirit called him to examine Christ. Drawn in by the practical expressions of the faith and the warm welcome he received, he began to study and read privately until one day he found himself a secret believer.

He moved from secret belief to testimony of his new faith when he left messages on the phones of his adult children telling them about his faith and his upcoming baptism. They were shocked.

What had moved Doug from his own personal “I will not believe” to his “My Lord and my God?” The practices of resurrection in believers at St. Barnabas, a typical socially progressive, Trinitarian Anglican parish.

Forgiveness and Inclusion; there’s a nice summary, a nice package; but of course, it was the wonder of those things, the injection of wonder into routine thought and firmly held conclusion that changed Doug, changed the disciples, over time.

It’s the “breathing” of the Spirit in and through the Eucharist and the inclusive actions of others that matters. Are you making “breathing room” in your soul?

He is Risen, let us live in his Peace. Amen.