

Holy God, send Your Word, send Your Spirit, send Your love. Amen.

Last Sunday we had exuberant, joyful worship in this place. It was incredible.

How long was it before “real life” took over again?

On the second Sunday of Easter we’re brought back to reality pretty quickly – Jesus’ followers might have felt joy that he was inexplicably alive, but they were also scared. They are back in the room where they held their Passover meal with him four days earlier, but now the doors locked for fear someone might arrest them.

And suddenly he is just there. Did you see him come in? The door never opened.

Hey, it’s still locked. The windows are shut. Where did he come from?

But here he is. And he is speaking: “Peace be with you.”

Whatever you’re going through in life, whatever is making you anxious,
Whatever you’re going home to: “Peace be with you.”

And not only that: I have a job for you. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Send us where? You’ll find out. With what? “Oh, I’m not sending you unequipped.

Here: Receive the Holy Spirit.” And what do we do with the Spirit?

“You forgive. You release. Or you hold people bound in their sin. Your choice.”

*“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;
if you retrain the sins of any, they are retained.”*

This authority we’ve been given to forgive sin is the most neglected of all the church’s missions. We’re not too bad on the retaining sin part – too often Christians are quick to judge and condemn.

But the mission we have been given to release people from sin?

To offer forgiveness and then walk with people into healing? That’s our super-power. It’s a huge authority, and responsibility. But it’s also a ministry of healing. The ministry of forgiveness is a ministry of healing.

On Jesus’ second visit to his community, a week after the first,

he invites Thomas to place his hands in the marks left by the nails and spear.

These wounds are still visible, but now they are healed.

The church makes much of the wounds of Christ – in part because Jesus led with them;

It was his first move, showing his wounds, saying, “It’s really me, guys.

I’ve been to death and back, and now death will never be the last word for you.”

And we have a promise in Isaiah that “by his wounds we are healed.”

When Jesus invites Thomas to put his hands in the marks of the nails,
and in his side, he is making that promise true:

“My wounds are real, and they are healed – draw power and love from them.”
By his wounds we are healed. We are healed of our sin, and of our sin-sickness,
which is another word for shame. We are set free to go and sin no more –
and when we do, to return and receive that gift as many times as we need to.
There is no limit to God’s forgiveness – and Jesus told his followers there
was to be no limit to the number of times they forgave either.

This is our ministry, folks! This is a huge part of our ministry. We need to do it.
We are in the forgiveness business, and man, does this world need us to exercise it.
We are in the business of setting people free, releasing them from the bondage
of unforgiven sin. And we need to be released ourselves.
If we’re either holding grudges, or holding guilt,
we are not exercising the ministry of forgiveness.
If we’re holding a grudge – and you know in your heart when you haven’t released
someone for something; or you’re holding on to guilt, unable to accept forgiveness –
those are areas to invite God to pour on his love, untangle the knots.

Later in this passage, Jesus said blessed are they who don’t see, and yet believe.
But we might say, “But how? How do we believe if we can’t see God?”
I will tell you – when you see people transformed through being forgiven,
you see God at work. That’s why small groups are so wonderful in churches –
you see God working in other people, and they see God working in you.
If you’ve ever experienced being forgiven;
if you’ve ever experienced forgiving another, you understand.

I once spent three days in a women’s prison. Not as an inmate, as part of a team of a
ministry called Kairos, which offers a short course in Christian life to the incarcerated.
I met so many women that weekend who had never in their lives
experienced forgiveness, and had trouble forgiving themselves.
Most of them had never, ever been told they were loved, or worthy of love,
that they were valuable, precious.
Most of the women in there were there because they had stolen something or tried to
sell themselves to get money for drugs, drugs they needed because they had
become addicted – and addiction is a disease that takes no prisoners.
And the reason they had started taking drugs was because each and every
one of them had suffered abuse or other trauma as children or teens,
and began using to anesthetize the pain and shame they carried around.
That’s who’s filling our women’s prisons. They’re not there because of moral
failings; they’re there because of systemic failings, our systems failing.

The transformation that I saw, even in three days, was astonishing, as these women began to hear for the first time in their lives that God loved them, that God delighted in them, that God had better things for them, that they were worthy of love.

It was going to take a lot longer than three days to integrate that, and there were groups in the prison led by inmates to help them walk on this new path, but just in those days I saw women come to life, like flowers starved of water open in the rain.

On the last morning, we lined up and greeted each participant as she came in, with a flower and singing – and then they began to dance down the line – and then they got in line to welcome the next person. I've never experienced such joy. I thought, "What if this happened in our churches on Sunday mornings?

There wouldn't be an open seat." Maybe some morning we'll try it!

This is what it means to retain or release the sins of others.

And when we release, we bring life. Why would we ever retain?

There are a lot of people in our communities who have never heard the gospel, never heard the good news of God's mercy and forgiveness and release, A lot of people who have only heard the not-so-good news that you have to be good, and if you can't be good you're a lost cause. Well, God has no lost causes. And God has sent us – sent us – to bear that news to people who need to hear it.

As we continue to discern the particular ministries into which God is inviting Christ Church, this is one of them, and it's one most churches neglect.

What addicts need to be forgiven and released?

What young people who've been abused or abandoned need to be released?

What divorced people? Depressed people? People broken in one way or another?

Someone you know needs to hear this word, maybe you,

and Jesus is here right here and right now, breathing his Spirit upon us and sending us, the same as he sent those apostles, to bear this healing word.

Now, a week later, he showed up again, and despite being sent, they were still there.

What will he find when he shows up here again in a week?

Amen.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked 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."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.