

**Peace be with you**  
Pastor Cynthia Lapp  
April 11, 2010  
Days of Prayer and Action for Colombia

John 20:19-31

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

On this second Sunday of Easter we have this story of the evening of the first day of the week. According to John, Mary met Jesus in the garden in the morning. Now it is evening, but the other disciples have not yet seen him. They probably have heard that he is no longer in the tomb, but do they believe?

The fearful disciples gather in a locked room. Perhaps it is the same upper room where they shared the Passover Seder just days earlier. But they are hiding from the religious authorities; it is more likely that they have changed locations as a protective measure. While the disciples are most certainly sharing their grief, they may also be strategizing their next steps. Who knows, these followers of Jesus might be the next candidates for the cross. Peter denied knowing Jesus but his accent — his whole being — betrayed him as a follower to those who observed him. Precautions must be taken in these dangerous days.

Suddenly Jesus is there with them!

“Peace be with you. As God sent me so I am sending you.”

*Sending me? Sending me where? Certainly not out of this room into danger. All this talk about peace is nice, but I am not leaving this room. No one can get me out of here. Though come to think of it, Jesus got in so maybe I'm not that safe after all.*

In the Bible, when a heavenly being appears in an extraordinary way, the greeting is usually, “do not be afraid.” But Jesus comes and his greeting is different, “Peace be with you. I am sending you.”

Jesus shows them his wounds, decidedly not the result of peacefulness, and he says again, “Peace be with you.” He breathes on them — the Holy Spirit. They are filled with the breath of God, just as the first creatures in Genesis were filled with God’s breath.

His next words — “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. If you hold on to anyone’s sins, they are held onto.” Peace and forgiveness! This is Jesus’ message after being brutally killed, even though he was determined innocent by the Roman authorities?

Like the disciples, many people in Colombia are behind closed doors and fear for their lives. They hide from the authorities. Our sisters and brothers have fled their homes, left their crops, tools and livelihoods behind. Now they live in fear behind the locked doors of their new homes or even churches. They know the wounds of war. They have seen death. They bear the scars of violence on their own bodies, the bodies of their families. In them, we see the wounded body of Christ.

When Jesus comes to that locked room, the disciples are excited. He breathes on them, comforts them, tells them to forgive and sends them out. In the ensuing days those that had gathered that evening tell absent Thomas about their experience. “Like Mary, we have seen the risen Christ.” But Thomas doesn’t believe them.

Is it the body or the message of which Thomas is so skeptical? Does Thomas doubt that Jesus is alive or does he doubt that Jesus is preaching peace and forgiveness? Either is hard to believe given the circumstances. How could Jesus appear, after enduring such a horrific and humiliating death, his wounds still healing. And then say “Peace be with you. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Do not forgive and you will not be forgiven.” The message is incongruous with the event.

A week passes; the disciples are meeting again, still behind locked doors. Perhaps they have been trying to convince Thomas about Jesus and his message, but it doesn't seem to have sunk in. They are all still fearful, in hiding. Jesus comes again through the closed door, again with the same greeting. “Peace be with you.” This time Thomas is present and Jesus is ready. He doesn't waste words, doesn't take time to try and convince Thomas. Jesus just says, “Put your hands in my wounds. Believe.” And Thomas believes.

Here in our relative comfort Jesus' greeting — Peace be with you — sounds almost like a liturgical instruction.

“The Lord be with you ...”

“... and also with you.”

But this story has real time meaning for peacemakers in Colombia. They know that Jesus comes to them, despite their tragic and violent situation. They hear Jesus' greeting, “Peace be with you,” in ways that we do not.

We certainly want peace, we need peace. We know we need peace here in our own area.

Several weeks ago I was at a neighborhood meeting in a home right behind the church to hear about a series of break-ins and thefts that have occurred on the cul-de-sac where some of us park our cars on Sunday mornings.

Just this week Annabelle looked out the office window and saw eight police cars lined up on East West Highway and two people being taken from their home in handcuffs.

And of course we wish for peace as we mourn the deaths of the young people in Southeast Washington who lost their lives in a senseless drive-by shooting two weeks ago.

Though we know of violence, perhaps even experience it, it is not the same as living with 40 years of civil war as have the people of Colombia. Most of us do not have to hide, as do the innocent people in Colombia. Janna Hunter-Bowman relates this story in Sojourner's magazine.

*When paramilitary soldiers came for 32-year-old Isaac Vargas Martinez on Aug. 5, 2009, church leaders contacted authorities — but were told that the army, located within walking distance, could not arrive until the following afternoon. Isaac fled to a church building, where dozens of members surrounded the wooden slat structure, kept vigil through the night, and the next day managed to sneak him out of town in disguise. Over the years, such life-saving practices have become a ministry of the church.*

A ministry of the church, to literally save lives. Not just saving souls; saving lives.

The gospel writer of John tells us there are many other stories that could be told but, these have been chosen and told that we might believe that Jesus shows the way, that Jesus is the One who shows the path to life.

There **are** many other stories. We hear stories of church members in Colombia who have disappeared. We listen to Ricardo Esquivia, who works for justice and peace in Colombia. We hear Adelina and Jasper, the pastors of our sister church in Sincelejo. Ricardo, Adelina and Jasper tell us their stories of fear, running for their lives, of leaving their land. They and many others are derided, rejected. They cry, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” These sisters and brothers bear the wounds of Christ.

Can we also hear Ricardo, Adelina and Jasper say that death does not have the final word? There is life; there can be peace. There can be forgiveness. The wounded of Colombia come to us and speak: *Peace be with you. Work for the ways that make for peace.*

Janna Hunter-Bowman worshipped with us here at Hyattsville for a year. Some years ago, she returned to Colombia with her husband, Jess. Two years ago their daughter, Amara, was born. Several weeks ago, Adelaide was born in their home in Bogota. Janna is seeking peace in Colombia. She works to make sure that the stories of threats, violence and terror are heard. Janna has touched the wounds in the body of Christ and now she tells the stories. She tells the stories to those in the United States — to those who hold the money and the power — so that the horror and violence will stop. Just as God sent Jesus, just as Jesus sent the disciples, now Janna has been sent. Like Ricardo, Adelina and

Jasper, she is sent with a message of peace. She has been sent by the power of God, by the power of Love, to listen and tell the stories.

The pastorate has selected Janna to receive the Beth Foster Memorial Scholarship so that Janna can complete her studies next year at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.

Beth Foster also lived among us for only a short time. As she approached death, Beth invited some of us to walk with her. She allowed some of us to figuratively put our hands in her wounds. These were not the wounds of war, of the paramilitary, of kidnapping and displacement that the people of Colombia display to Janna. There were the psychological and emotional wounds of a woman who felt displaced in her own family, who endured cruelty at the hands of people who should have shown love.

Some of us did not want to believe that out of those wounds could come peace and forgiveness. But as we touched Beth, we saw peace in her and among her caregivers. We wanted to experience forgiveness. We saw and believed that there was new life there, a surprising kind of life that only God can give.

We must have the courage, like Thomas, to touch the wounds of violence. It must have been unnerving for Thomas to place his hands in the wounds of Christ, to feel the place of pain and agony, to know intimately the death that was there. And yet he took that risk and in doing so he believed. Did he believe that Jesus was risen? Did he believe the message of peace and forgiveness that Jesus continued to preach even in his new form?

The people of Colombia know too well the wounds of Christ; they have touched his side and placed their hands in his hands. They know the horror and yet they call out to us that there can be peace. They believe that there is another way besides ongoing warfare.

Jesus said “Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” In a 40-year civil war, there are many in Colombia who have never seen peace yet they believe, they believe it is possible. They have not experienced forgiveness but they are willing to grant it.

Jesus tells Thomas that those who believe when they have not seen are blessed. The peacemakers of Colombia are blessed and a blessing for they have not seen peace, but they believe it is possible. Let us walk with them, as God sends us — telling their stories, teaching peace and practicing forgiveness.

Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed. Peace be with you.