

Third Sunday of Easter, Year C

*Readings for the Second Sunday of Easter, Year C*

A Sermon Preached by Sr Greta Ronningen

on May 5, 2025

Acts 5:27-32 / Psalm 150 / Revelation 1:4-8 / John 20:19-31

I love the season of Eastertide. I love the mystical stories of Jesus appearing after the heaviness or grief of his death. It is a time filled with mystery and tenderness. His first appearance was with his beloved Mary Magdalene. He said her name and then sent her to tell the other disciples. She was first person after his death to say, "I have seen the Lord." She was steadfast in her courage, not hiding in fear.

The disciples were afraid and were hiding. Jesus appeared and stood among them and said Shalom which is translated in our bibles as "Peace be with you." But scholars of the bible say that this word, Shalom, means more than peace it conveys a sense of wholeness or completion. As though greeting someone and wishing them a deep sense of well-being. Jesus did not judge his disciples for hiding he appeared for their comfort and reassurance.

It seems important to take this message in. Jesus loves us when we are brave and showing up at the empty tomb and when we are afraid and hiding concerned for our safety. I think we can sometimes be hard on ourselves that we aren't measuring up, not demonstrating courage, therefore we are not worthy of the love of God. It is hard for us to imagine a love that wants us to be whole and complete whether we are strong or weak. But this is Jesus. He accepts us where we are.

He offered them a second Shalom and then said to the disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." As he was an agent of his Father, he now commissions us to be agents of Him in the world. Then to empower them he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Just as God breathed life into the creation of humans in Genesis.

The word for the Holy Spirit in Greek is pneuma which can mean breath, wind or spirit. And in Hebrew the word for breath, wind or spirit is Ruah.

One of my favorite spiritual authors is James Finley. He teaches a practice on his retreats that involves breathing in God's love. He says to imagine breathing in the words, "I love you," and breathing out silently, "I love you." This is done repeatedly until you feel united to Divine Love. It is a profoundly healing or whole-making spiritual practice which can bring one into communion with God. I use this often when I feel unbalanced or out of touch with God.

Now as the disciples are receiving the Holy Spirit that Jesus was breathing into them, he said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." It is remarkable that the last message that Jesus brought these men was one of forgiveness. Surely, they must have been angry at those in power who participated in the execution of their beloved teacher and maybe Jesus wanted to impress upon them that his was not the path of revenge but the path of forgiveness. Maybe Jesus wanted to remind them that to be his agents in the world there must be utter forgiveness for all those who think differently and act in sinful ways.

I facilitate a program at the California Men's Colony, the local prison every Friday. I sit in listening circles with about 20 men as we address many topics in a 16-week journey of healing. One of the first things that men face is the environment that they were raised in. They answer a questionnaire called the ACE's or Adverse Childhood Experiences. There are ten questions addressing such things as was one of your parents an addict, or did have enough to eat, or was there violence in your home. The higher the number of adverse experiences the more likely you are to have severe health issues such as COPD or heart disease and the more likely you are to turn to addiction to cope with the trauma. Most of the men in the circle are 8's, 9's and even 10's. They are what we call hurt people who hurt people.

One of the last sessions of the program is focused on forgiveness. They write out who it is that is hardest to forgive – not counting themselves. Men behind bars all know that self-forgiveness is the hardest. The men know that the path to wholeness and healing and freedom is through forgiveness. That holding resentments will only keep them stuck in the poison of anger and pain.

Carlos, one of the men told a heart-breaking story about his son. A gang member threatened to make his son disappear and told him you will never find him. And then this happened. Carlos has been sitting in his hatred dreaming of revenge for 23 years. But miraculously this group managed to dislodge his fury and he started to see that it was only hurting him. On the last day he told the group that he was going to let go of his hatred. He decided he couldn't carry on with this burden.

I saw with my own eyes the relief he was starting to feel. Forgiveness never means that what was done was in any way ok. It is only for our freedom and healing.

Jesus wants us to live Shalom both whole and complete, not holding onto anger and resentments. He wants peace to be with us. He tells his closest disciples not to retain but to forgive the sins of his persecution and death. It is the only way they will be able to live into their mission of love.

And He knows it is a lot to ask. Loving our enemies seems nearly impossible, but it is what followers of Jesus are called to.

Who or what do you have the hardest time forgiving? What triggers you the most and takes up too much space in your mind?

During this mystical season of Easter could you find some forgiveness and freedom moving towards wholeness and healing?

And if you are not ready to forgive but are still retaining the sins of others, I can assure you that Jesus is loving you just as you are. Amen.