

2nd Sunday of Easter
Senior Preacher: Rachel Spahn '24
Gospel Text: John 20: 19–31
April 7, 2024

Hi everyone! For those who do not know me, my name is Rachel, and I am a senior studying Economics, Middle East and North African Studies, and Arabic.

When I received this John 20 text, I read it with a heavy heart. The disciples are fearful, hiding behind locked doors; Jesus has died, Thomas doubts, and the disciples have no real idea how to live life without Jesus.

As many of you have heard from my contributions to 21theo or simply my conversations in life, the War on Gaza has weighed on me heavily over these past 183 days, and the question of Palestinian sovereignty and security since I visited the Holy Land last summer.

On Sunday, we heard the story of Mary Magdalene going to the tomb and rejoicing in Jesus's resurrection—a story that helps us, as disciples, see Jesus and spread the good news. Crazy enough...I saw the tomb. *The* tomb where Jesus supposedly laid after his crucifixion at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. And when I was in Jerusalem, I saw Jesus...I saw more than Jesus, which brings me to my sermon today. When Deanna and I worked through this scripture, we talked about the ways Jesus breaks down barriers, the Jesus whom God has sent and encourages us to send others; he is the Jesus who can move through locked doors, and this is the Jesus I need today.

The Text

While this is a very robust text, I see four key points that I want to highlight today. Jesus enters despite locked doors, sharing peace, breathing the Holy Spirit into us, and reminding us, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

In Lutheran liturgy, we share the peace with each other every week. Maybe through a quick peace sign or shaking a hand, we wish peace for our neighbors before going about our Sundays to finish problem sets, take naps, or take more naps.

But what *is* this peace? Where do we get the authority to give each other peace? How can I just turn to my friend struggling with exams, thesis, the cold weather, war and just say “peace”? In John chapter 20, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples, resurrected and saved. He approaches them amidst deep sadness, fear, and anxiety since his death and says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This is a radical thing. This isn't just ‘peace’. Jesus reveals himself to his disciples with radical understanding, forgiveness, and love. I know I would be in absolute disbelief.

But Jesus sees us in our disbelief and blesses us with peace. He, in fact, breathes the Holy Spirit into the disciples. And in Jesus's resurrection, the coming of the spirit informs their lives differently: Jesus is still with them, and because of this, we are not alone.

When I first read this text, I actually felt the opposite of called. I heard ‘peace’ and thought about simply letting go of all the things that worry me and sitting comfortably, knowing that I am saved by what God has done and not by what I have to do. And while this is true—that we don’t have to live up to certain societal values or be straight-A students to be seen and saved by God—I think it is misleading. In this text, not only does Jesus wish peace upon us and commit to staying with us through the Holy Spirit, but he *sends us*. He says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Spreading peace—this radical forgiveness, love, strength, and more—is in our vocation, in our baptism, and lives with us through the Holy Spirit. It guides us in a world full of fear and grief and calls us to ACT.

This summer, I was studying abroad (as I love to mention) in Jordan with our very own Tomás when I took a trip to Jerusalem and the West Bank. I traveled with three friends: my Catholic friend Joe from North Carolina and my Muslim friends Yasmeen and Omar from Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. And wow, was I scared. When I entered the Israeli border crossing that would let us enter near Jericho, I watched some of the most blatant discrimination I had ever seen in my life. Even though we each entered with our American passports for the same reasons—to each visit our respective holy sites—it took us about 5 hours to get through the border crossing. Omar and Yasmeen had been escorted by soldiers to be interrogated about their family histories and travel records while Joe and I waited in silence just in absolute awe of this spectacle that is watching an American traveler translate between an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian man seeking medical care for his visibly broken leg in Ramallah. He was denied entry. It was shocking, and it was horrible, and there are more stories and more moments when all I could think to myself was: how can this be such a holy land when there is such a divided people?

After even this brief exposure, I wanted to go back behind my locked door. Because if I saw this discrimination, I would lose my peace, and I feel like I have lost and continue to struggle to find my peace during this war. But I am reminded from Mark 8: 36 (LIKE WE STUDIED IN 21THEO) of the question: for what will you profit if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul? And for me, I think Jesus said that I will have to lose my peace in order to gain it.

We started in Jerusalem and then went to the West Bank—to Bethlehem—which at the time I thought was funny because we started at the incredibly somber place of Jesus’s crucifixion and then went to his triumphant birthplace, where the altar was basically wrapped in gold. But I’m glad we did because I do listen when Deanna tells us that all roads lead us back to our baptism.

Now, the church was one of the most dizzying experiences of my life. I watched people from all places weep over Mary’s and Jesus’s tombs and gather joyfully for his resurrection. I remember this group of families from Kenya were in line in front of me to pray by Mary’s shrine, and the common connection, the solidarity, strength, and resilience to get all the way to Jerusalem to partake in their faith astounded me. That was the first time I had ever really felt the spirit move through me. I was praying where Jesus was crucified, and I felt like I was experiencing an anguish I had never experienced before and a deep connection with what God has done.

Afterward, we traveled through border crossings to Bethlehem, a holy town besieged by the weight of politics separating its Palestinian residents from the holy city of Jerusalem. But it was my

favorite. While murals represented the legacies of the Crusaders' invasions, there was one little exposed piece of the supposed original ground of the cave. And *that's* where I saw Jesus.

Now, as I mentioned, I traveled with my friends, and we split up by our religions to experience these holy spaces. So, I went to the Church of the Nativity with Joe. My friend Joe is one of the kindest people I've ever met, and certainly to a fault sometimes because he is just not city-savvy. But I see Jesus in Joe all the time. There was this lovely Greek lady who was absolutely in awe of the Church and the cave where Jesus was born. She had hip problems and couldn't reach down to touch the original ground, which is what most visitors hold onto while they pray. I told her that just being in the space meant enough, and she agreed and went about the room. But Joe saw her behind this locked door. So, it was only a few minutes before he got her attention and promised that we would figure out a way to lower her to the ground. And it took a while, and it was hard because she was in pain, but we did, and wow, she wept. I think she was weeping because she could feel so connected to God and the holy space in this moment, but I also think she was weeping because of Joe—as I then began to weep too—because I felt like I just saw Jesus in his birth, death, and resurrection in Joe.

That's when I think 'seeing Jesus' made sense to me and brings me to my favorite part of this text: the locked doors. Amidst their sadness and anxiety, when the disciples had locked their doors out of fear, Jesus still entered, granted them peace, and called them to share God's message. In his crucifixion, too, Jesus dismantles the things we think can't be surpassed by dying on the cross to save us from our sins. He does not let us stay behind locked doors; he breaks down barriers and calls us to look up and see him, see the cross. By looking at that which is suffering, we see that more than suffering comes out of experience, which means seeing things we don't want to see and seeing the needs of others, treating people with radical compassion, forgiveness, and love.

I think Jesus brought me to see his death, resurrection, and birth for a reason I feel so strongly today—to see people who need our help. I mean, it's hard not to see and feel all of these emotions being in the Holy Land and not think that, wow...Jesus *is* Palestinian. In the face of persecution—people wanting him to die because of his threats to religious authority and relationship with God—he still preached on themes of justice and liberation. **BECAUSE JESUS MOVES THROUGH LOCKED DOORS LIKE POLITICS, GEOGRAPHIES, SOCIAL BARRIERS, AND BRINGS US PEACE, AND CALLS US TO ACT.** I was in the Holy Land, where not all people are allowed to be holy. I am so beyond lucky and privileged to have been able to experience this holy place, and I can't help but think about my Palestinian friends in Jordan and *at this school* who will never be allowed to return to their homes or experience Jesus or their holy spaces because of laws and social barriers that won't let them. I will never forget my Arabic professor telling me to go experience her Palestine and bring a piece of the place back with me. And I think to me, that piece was Jesus. And that **peace** is Jesus too! We, as today's disciples, have these stories that show us the truth because we can't see (you know, we weren't there) Jesus emerge from his tomb. But as the scripture says, "Blessed are those who have not seen, yet believe." **We are the blessed.**

Jesus finds us in these hard times and gives us peace and forgiveness, breathing into our lives through the Holy Spirit. He also calls us to act and empowers us to advocate for the unseen and unheard. He does not stop behind locked doors, and nor should we, because blessed are those who

have not seen and yet believe in this way of life. He leads us to act with radical forgiveness and love, and this is the Jesus I need to hear today.

For Gaza,

I pray every day for a ceasefire because I think Jesus would also call out injustices, speak peace, and call for action from his disciples. On Maundy Thursday and in the resurrection stories, he calls us to “love and serve.” Have you heard this before? I hope that in the wake of Jesus’s death and resurrection, we feel called to serve, knowing Jesus will keep breaking barriers for us—showing us injustices in real time—and keep showing up despite locked doors, and bring us to peace.

For my fellow seniors,

I hope we are all able to love and serve beyond this community. It is such a blessing to be a part of this space where we are always breaking barriers in our bonds with one another, for each other in 21theo, and for ourselves in our faith journey. As you each move on to new places, new churches, and experience more ministry, I hope you hear this call to keep breaking down barriers as Jesus does.

And to the newly elected leaders and congregation! Deanna told me that you identified breaking barriers as a critical piece of the new Who We Are statement! It makes me feel so comforted leaving Northwestern soon, knowing that a new legacy begins. I hope you keep feeling called to do this work because You have the strength to do so in each other and in Jesus! And when it gets tough or LCMNU feels like a lot of work, remember: Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. Peace be with you. Go, be sent as Jesus and God have sent us. And keep breaking down locked doors because Jesus’s peace and love and forgiveness will be with you every step of the way.

In Jesus’s name, Amen.