



Holding Fast

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 8, 2018

John 20: 19-31

We are in Eastertide, the great fifty days beginning with Easter Sunday and ending with Pentecost. Alleluia, Christ is risen! -we are going to say a hundred times for the next 43 days. But what does that even mean? Let's have the courage to ask, how can such a seemingly impossible statement have anything to do with us in 21st century Minnesota, beyond the beauty of an ancient tradition? Downstairs between the services today Tony Jones is going to come talk about the resurrection today and next Sunday, and I strongly encourage you to go listen to him – it should be a great presentation and conversation starter. But today I want to share with you what I understand from today's gospel reading to be the heart of what Jesus' resurrection is about.

So to set the stage for today's reading, it's the Sunday after Jesus' death, where the disciples are huddled together in a room somewhere, totally shattered, and hiding because their fear and grief and shame are so strong. By now they've heard Mary Magdalene's story that she has encountered Jesus, and perhaps they've even gathered in that room to discuss what in the world it could mean. And into the middle of that scene Jesus appears and says, Peace be with you. He shows them his wounds, and then does something strange. He breathes on them, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit"—which is meant to evoke the beginning of time, when God breathes into the nostrils

of the first person, Adam, and he becomes a living soul. Jesus is implying that this is a beginning that is so very powerful it is like the creation of the world itself. Then he says something that seems jarring. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Why would Jesus give those weak, unreliable disciples who had just abandoned him to torture and death the power to choose whether or not to forgive anyone’s sins? In John’s gospel this is actually the only time Jesus talks about forgiveness of sins at all – he’s much more concerned with trust and life in the gospel of John. And throughout the rest of the New Testament, isn’t Jesus all about forgiving anyone who asks him, regardless how horrifying their sins were? So this statement seems incompatible with the rest of Jesus’ life, and it hardly seems like a beginning worthy of being compared to creation itself.

There is a biblical scholar named Sandra Schneider who has translated that phrase differently. Without going into all the details, she says that the original language should better be translated something like, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you hold fast to anyone, they are held fast.”¹ That’s very different. What could Jesus mean by “holding fast”? Let me answer by telling a story.

Some of you know that my husband Jeff is an addiction counselor. He does assessments for clients who are first coming into the treatment center where he works, to determine whether or not they need treatment for addiction and for a variety of mental health issues. So he has to ask them a lot of very personal information. He gave me permission to share this story with you. He once had a man in his office who was downright scary. He was covered with tattoos, and had recently been released from a long time in prison. Jeff

¹ See Mary Hinkle Shore, “Commentary on John 20:19-31” in *Working Preacher*, April 8, 2018, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3619, accessed April 7, 2018.

said that when he showed up in Jeff's office, he had his arms crossed on his chest, looking completely defiant. Over the course of the interview, when Jeff asked him how he coped with his years in prison, the man answered that he just kept thinking about the people who had put him there, and how he planned to kill each of them when he was released. He said outrageously racist things. He was homicidal. But Jeff continued to speak with him, and eventually got him to the point where he admitted that he felt empty, and that he had felt empty since he was born. Jeff told him that treatment could begin to address the reasons he felt empty. And by the end of the conversation, the man's shoulders and arms had dropped, he was holding his face in his hands, and he said, when can I start?

I asked Jeff what in the world made him able to work with this guy instead of showing him the door. Jeff said that he had had hundreds of people from all kinds of walks of life through his office. Each one of them was so unique – there was a woman who had a condition where her skin would fall off, and another man who had passed out drunk in Duluth and gotten frostbite so badly that he lost all ten of his fingers, and another guy who grew up in West Africa and witnessed both war and repeated sexual abuse as a child, and on and on. He said that when you focus too much on any one individual's quirks, it's easy to judge them, but when you see person after person and the same themes come up again and again, you realize they are just manifesting different versions of the human condition, of hope, and despair and brokenness, the same things that Jeff himself experiences in his life. So he sees their humanity with natural compassion, and he can hold on to them until they have enough hope to begin to imagine something different and be willing to work on it. That is holding fast. It was a holding fast that in the case of this man, led to the possibility of him imagining true healing, the beginning of an entirely new life.

Here's another example. Did any of you see the movie Good Will Hunting? It was a movie from 20 years ago where Matt Damon is this young man in therapy with Robin Williams, the therapist. Matt Damon had experienced severe abuse from his foster family as a child, and there is this scene when Robin Williams repeats over and over, it's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault. Matt Damon says, I know, but when Robin Williams keeps repeating this, Damon breaks down and gets mad and pushes him away, and finally throws his arms around Robin Williams and sobs. This is holding fast.

I recently saw a newspaper article with a photo of a man standing on the outside rail of a bridge, clearly intending to commit suicide. But there are tons of people just on the other side of the bridge, who have put their belts and ties and arms all around every part of the man's body, tying him to the bridge, talking to him until the ambulance can get there and he can be taken to a place where he can get some help. That is holding fast.

If you hold fast to anyone, they are held fast. I've given you some extreme examples, and I debated doing so, because I don't want you not to see yourself and those you love in those scenarios. My husband Jeff has got it right. We are all there. We all need to be held fast, and when Jesus does that for us, we do receive new life that is as profound as the creation of the world.

Jesus was sent to show us the heart of God. In today's gospel story Jesus says, As God has sent me, now I send you. Jesus is saying, Receive the Holy Spirit. Receive life that far surpasses what you have known thus far. Because of this life, you are empowered to forgive others. Because of this life, you are empowered to hold fast to people. To give them what they need even if they don't deserve it, because God calls them Beloved just as God calls you Beloved. This is why when the disciple Thomas says I will not believe unless

I put my finger in Jesus' scars, Jesus doesn't judge him. Jesus just meets him where he is and says, here, look at my scars. See that I'm still here. Doubt, like hope, despair, and brokenness, are part of the human condition—exactly what Jesus came to share and heal.

Maundy Thursday I preached about getting close up to people, especially people you can't stand, because it's hard to hate people close up. When you get close enough to people to see their scars, you're close enough to hold fast to them, to forgive them, to live into our vocation as people sent by Christ into the world to love it into healing and transformation. This is our vocation as followers of the way of Jesus.

And you know, sometimes we get it wrong. Sometimes we're more like Peter who denied Jesus or the disciples huddled in the upper room stuck in grief and shame about having failed to save the one they loved. Into all of these situations the risen Christ, whom not even death could defeat, still comes breathing new life into us, and inviting us to receive. Forgive. Hold fast.