

## Of gratitude and forgiveness

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Second Sunday of Easter - April 16, 2023

Texts: Psalm 16, John 20:19-31

### RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 16

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Beloved, "You are my Life;

**I have no good apart from you." As for the holy ones in the land, I delight in them.**

Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;

I will not share in their offerings or even say their names aloud.

**You, Holy One, are my chosen way: you show me my path and hold my future.**

Surely the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a wonderful inheritance.

**I bless the Teacher who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.**

I keep your face always before me; because you are at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

**Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.**

For you do not give me up to despair, or let your faithful one see death. You show me the path of life.

**In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.**

### GOSPEL READING John 20:19-31

*Mary shared her experience of the risen Christ with the disciples on Easter morning.*

When it was evening on that same 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. *Word of God, Word of Life. Thanks be to God.*

“Through believing you may have life in his name.” What is resurrection of the body? What is eternal life? Very few Old Testament texts even hint at those things—three, to be exact. Psalm 16 is one of them. After my mother’s death, we found these words underlined in her Bible: “I bless the Lord who gives me counsel. In the night also my heart instructs me.... You do not give me up to despair or let your faithful one see death or decay.” She dated it the day she found out about the illness that would end her earthly life. Yet she found deep spiritual contentment in her last months. That same day, she got a letter from her wayward daughter in Japan. Essentially it said what Dr. Ira Byock calls the four things that matter most: “I forgive you. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.”<sup>1</sup> I was the writer. Though we were far from being estranged, tensions did occur. From that day they began to heal.



My father outlived my mother by 32 years. *His* favorite words from Psalm 16 were different. My sister inscribed them on a huge banner to celebrate his birthday one year: “Surely the boundaries have fallen for me in pleasant places.” Not only could he say this after the loss of his wife, his only sibling, and much of his prestige and possessions, but he gave thanks in all of it. Not necessarily *for* all of it, but *through* all of it, you understand. He was endlessly forgiving, not only of his daughters’ deviations from his faith and way of life, but of life’s casual cruelties.

Without seeing Jesus, without touching him, they had come to believe. Even though the Sunday after Easter usually often focuses on so-called “doubting Thomas,” I love what comes before: how overjoyed the disciples were to see him, how overcome with amazement and gratitude. And the gifts he gave them. He said, “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; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”



Listen to these gifts: Peace, peace, peace be with you. Jesus says it three times in this story. And he gives his disciples not just peace but purpose—he delegates to them his God-given task, to speak good news to the sad and broken people of the world. Then he gives them the means to accomplish the mission: the Holy Spirit living and breathing within them. And more, what is often overlooked, the power to forgive. Do you see how closely they are connected?

As we embark on this Easter season of gratitude, the element I feel most grateful for today is the power to forgive. Forgiveness is the way to peace, forgiveness is a gift of the Spirit within, forgiveness is undeserved grace, from God to you, from you to the world. “Forgiveness is a form of gratitude,”<sup>2</sup> a way of passing along the grace you’ve received, the grace of Jesus who forgave his murderers on the cross, who forgave his disciples for betraying and abandoning him, who

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<sup>1</sup> Ira Byock, *The Four Things that Matter Most: A Book about Living*

<sup>2</sup> Quote attributed to Sarah Ban Breathnach

forgave Thomas for needing proof. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, we pray—but really, isn't it, may we learn to forgive as we have first been forgiven?



When you forgive, you unbind someone, you release them from your judgment. Forgiveness has little to do with right and wrong and everything to do with a return to wholeness. What is it you really want? That inheritance you feel was stolen from you, or a restored relationship with your sisters and brothers, your oldest friends? Forgiveness is healing.

Forgiving is unbinding yourself from the toxic emotions of resentment, frustration, hurt, and blame. As Anne Lamott said, “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”<sup>3</sup> Forgive and you are free to love. You are free to live joyfully, love simply, like a child or like your devoted animal companion, without regrets or resentments. As Bob likes to remind me, “If you accidentally locked your spouse and your dog in the garage overnight, which one would be happy to see you in the morning?” Our dogs harbor no hurt feelings! Forgiveness is freedom.



Forgiveness is not excusing bad behavior in someone else, and when you ask someone for forgiveness you don't ask them to excuse the hurt you caused (even if that garage debacle *was* an accident). Excusing and forgiving are two very different things. God doesn't excuse what we have done or left undone; but after all, we're not so much punished *for* our sin but punished *by* its consequences. God forgives. God will forgive. God has already forgiven. When you forgive, you come out of the dead past into the living present. Forgiveness *is* resurrection.

Like Christ on the cross, forgiving his accusers and tormentors, God's judgment is always mercy. Forgiving makes you one with God. Makes you at-one with God. Makes God's Spirit as at home in your body as your breath, and as close. Letting the Spirit carry you into the world, offering forgiveness and bringing peace.

So today, I am grateful for so much in my life. I'm grateful for my parents, who gave me an intimate and personal acquaintance with the God and the Bible they loved. I'm grateful for their forgiveness and the forgiveness of so many I've locked in the garage accidentally or even (occasionally) on purpose, I'm grateful to God for the forgiveness that has been mine since before I was born, and for the forgiveness that is Christ's gift to me to pass along, just as he gave it to his first disciples, despite their doubt, despite their fear, despite their reluctance to go and do the task he gave them. What about you? Peace, purpose, power, pardon? What's not to be grateful for? Thanks be to God. Amen.



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<sup>3</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, p. 134.

## Prayers

God of mercy, teach us to forgive, seventy-times seven, through your Spirit, grant us an infinity of grace to give to others as you have given to us. Help us cleanse our souls of the toxins of resentment, blame, feeling put upon. And then help us to act in your name to rid our world of evil and danger.

We lift our hearts to you in concern for all living creatures suffering from war, deprivation, the excesses of nature due to climate change: floods and tornadoes in this country, famine elsewhere, uprisings in Sudan, conflict in Israel/Palestine. May the blessings we enjoy in such abundance never blind us to the suffering of others.

We hold in your Light today those recovering from surgery, all who are ill or facing death, all who are lonely and despairing, and all who mourn recent losses. Bring them healing and comfort.

Breathe on us today, give us strength and courage to leave this place confident that your resurrection gifts go with us. We ask this in the name of our risen Savior who taught us to pray: Our Mother and Father in heaven, holy be your name.

Impose your reign that we may do your will, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today this one day's bread.

Forgive our wrongs as we forgive those who do wrong against us.

Save us from our temptations and keep us from doing evil,

For the Realm, the power, and the glory are yours, Now and forever. Amen.

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Christ Appearing to the Apostles, 1450-1460, anonymous. From Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

Forgiveness, courtesy of *unsplash*, Susan Q Yin.

Dog leaping, courtesy of *unsplash*.

The Atlantic Photo, People visit an azalea field at Nezu Shrine in Tokyo's Bunkyo district on April 11, 2023, as part of the shrine's azalea festival.

Keukenhof Gardens, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Thanks to Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, for this paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer.