

An Important Breakthrough

[Text - John 20:19-31]

Pastor Dave Shackle
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One of the more popular strategies being used by politicians today, is to stir-up people's *fear*. From crime to corruption to caravans of invading immigrants, you and I are surrounded by things that should *really* make us afraid! *Terrorism* is on the rise, which of course should *terrify* us! Gun violence is increasing, so we need more guns! Enemies are flooding across our borders, so we'd better build that big, beautiful wall to keep us safe! The world around us is in a dreadful state and full of danger; so say your prayers, lock-up your daughters, and call out the National Guard! Or maybe not....

On the first Easter evening, Jesus' disciples were also in a dreadful state, and full of fear. They hid behind locked doors, hoping that *those* walls might somehow keep them safe. The One in whom they placed their faith, had been brutally killed; and they were afraid that they themselves might be next. But then, something happens that changes all of that. Somehow, they experience a complete turn-around; one which could be described as "miraculous!" And while *what* they experience may fly in the face of what you and I consider *normal*, it is nevertheless completely *compatible* with what they and others have previously experienced in their encounters with Jesus Christ.

Throughout his life, Jesus seeks-out, embraces and lifts-up people who are frightened or fragile, hurting or hiding - regardless of who they are or how they might choose to isolate themselves. And this encounter on that first Easter evening is no different. In spite of those tightly locked doors, Jesus Christ comes to his friends, stands among them and says, "Peace be with you!" He doesn't say, "You all ran away and let me down, just like I thought you might!" He doesn't tell them, "I am really disappointed with you!" He simply says to them, "*Shalom aleikhem* - Peace and Wholeness be with you!" Then, to further repair their courage and bolster their confidence, Jesus says to them, "As the Holy One has sent me, so I now send you!" And he

breathes upon them the power of the Holy Spirit, to let them know that they now have the power to forgive themselves, as well as the capacity to forgive - and to love - anyone who might try to frighten or harm them. And as we know - not only from the Biblical accounts, but also by the historic results - this little ragtag group of ordinary people is able to rise above their fears and doubts, and to transform the world in extraordinary ways!

Now unfortunately, one of their group, Thomas, misses-out on this profound experience. [Which is a good reminder that one should *never* skip a Sunday gathering!] Nevertheless, Jesus still finds a way to encounter this one, skeptical individual, so that his life and faith, courage and hope might also be restored. And if Jesus doesn't penalize Thomas for doubting in him, he certainly won't penalize you and me when we have our own doubts. The Good News of Easter, is that our lives are not renewed and restored by our religious beliefs; they are regenerated and redeemed by our *faith* - by our trusting in the unfailing power of Divine Love and Grace. Because when you and I truly *trust* that the Source of our lives - and all that exists - is good and gracious, caring and compassionate, then we ourselves are inspired to live in ways that are good and gracious, caring and compassionate.

For you and me today, the Christian Faith can't merely consist of our believing in something extraordinary that happened centuries ago. Our Faith needs to inspire us to trust in the *continuing* action of the Holy One in the here-and-now. Personally, I have never had a vision of the Risen Christ, yet I trust that Jesus Christ is alive and active in the world today. That trust comes, in part, because of the dramatic change in the lives of those first followers. Yet it also comes from seeing the awesome impact of the Living Christ in the lives of people today - many of them sitting right here!

This morning and throughout this Easter Season, you and I are encouraged to recover the underlying Truth within each of those early Resurrection accounts: That the Eternal Source of Divine Love - revealed in Jesus Christ - remains constant and unstoppable. And if

that Holy Love will not rest until all people and all of Creation are restored and redeemed, then you and I should persevere as well!

We may not have the ability to walk through tightly locked doors or big, beautiful walls; but we certainly have the capacity to throw those doors wide-open and to knock-down those walls! We can break-down the social and religious barriers that prevent people from seeing all those around them as their true sisters and brothers. We can raise our voices to counter those voices of fear and hatred, bigotry and malice which are so prevalent today. Together we can embrace and embody the Living, Loving Christ - The One who continues to move and work among us and within us. And just like Jesus, you and I will find the courage to welcome the outcast; to comfort the afflicted; to forgive those who do us wrong; and to live our lives fully, freely, and fearlessly!