

Easter 2, Year C
April 28, 2019
Saint James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

I couldn't help but notice the guy holding the upside-down cross.
I was sitting in a church over in east Denver recently.
One I'd never been in before.
It was a beautiful church,
with lovely stained glass windows and a painted ceiling.
But the thing that really caught my attention
Was the 12 carved, painted wooden figurines
Behind the altar.
One of them was holding the bottom end of a cross.

A card in the pew rack in front of me
Explained that the figures represented each of the 12 disciples –
That is, 11 of the original 12,
plus Matthias, the one chosen later to replace Judas.

The card went on to explain
how each of the 12 is believed to have died.
And if the stories are true,
Then being a disciple was pretty dangerous work.
Of the 12, only ONE of them died of old age.

Here's what the card said:
Peter – crucified upside down.
(He was the guy holding the upside-down cross.)
Andrew, crucified.
James – that's OUR guy – beheaded.
Matthew, speared to death.
Bartholemew, flayed to death by a whip.
Philip, crucified.
Thomas, speared to death.
Simon, crucified.
Thaddeus, stoned to death.
Matthias, stoned then beheaded.

Only John lived into old age and presumably died of natural causes.

Interestingly, it was to THIS VERY GROUP OF PEOPLE,
These soon-to-be martyrs,
that Jesus appears in our gospel lesson this morning.

They were hiding behind a locked door
when Jesus suddenly appeared among them.
And the first thing he says to them is ...
“Peace be with you.”

How ironic is that?
Because for the rest of their lives,
these men sure wouldn't know much peace.
They would die violent, excruciating deaths.

Our gospel lesson from John says that when they saw Jesus they rejoiced.
But the other gospel writers tell a slightly different story.
The other gospel writers report
that when the disciples saw Jesus, they were terrified...
Because they thought they were seeing a ghost.

But Jesus is no ghost.
He proceeds to show them that he's just as real,
just as flesh and blood,
as you and me.
He invites Thomas to touch him,
to put his hand in his wounds.

I'd say they had good reason to be afraid!
Not because Jesus is a ghost.
But because Jesus is ALIVE.

Alive... and asking them to bear witness to that fact.
Alive... and sending them out into the world to share his story.
“As my Father has sent me, so I send you,” he tells them.
And THAT'S what should have terrified them.
Because that was a mission
that would cost most of them their lives.
Jesus surely knows that.

He knows what they're going to have to face.
But still he tells them not to be afraid.

There are so many things that frighten us.
And we don't want to face our fears.
We want to be protected from them.
So we put our faith in things that we think will keep us safe.
But often as not, we're only fooling ourselves.

I grew up in the 1960s,
a scary time to be a kid.
It was the height of the Cold War,
and we were worried about nuclear annihilation.
People built bomb shelters,
thinking those bomb shelters could keep us safe
if the Russians attacked.

Sometimes I'd lie in my bed at night,
and I couldn't go to sleep because I was so afraid.
So to calm my fears, I would tell myself
that God had put a giant force field all over America
So that if the Russians tried to bomb us in the middle of the night,
The bombs would just bounce off
And wouldn't hurt us.

And then I would imagine
that God also put a force field around my house.
So if any bad people tried to break in,
they wouldn't be able to.

But on the off chance they DID manage to get into my house,
I had an extra security shield around my bedroom.
Even if a bad person were prowling through the rest of the house,
He wouldn't be able to get through my bedroom door.

And just to make absolutely sure
that I was protected from any monsters
that might be hiding in the closet or under the bed,
I imagined that finally I had my own personal force field
Wrapping me in a blanket of security

That no madman's knife could cut through.

And thus, swaddled in layer after layer
of imaginary security,
I would finally fall asleep,
having convinced myself
that no harm could possibly come to me.

It was all a lie, of course.
I wasn't particularly safe from any of my fears.
I just wanted to believe I was.

But I was child,
So maybe you'll excuse my overactive imagination
And my make-believe protection.

But you know what?
I still do it.
We all do.

Whether as individuals,
or as a nation,
We're terrified of things we can't control,
And so we put our faith in things we imagine will keep us safe.

But we're NOT safe.
We never have been.
And real security is not to be found
Behind a locked door
Or in a bomb shelter,
Or along a guarded fence
Or in a fat bank account.

The disciples locked the door to the room where they were huddled,
But no locked door could keep Jesus out.
And when he entered that room
and greeted his disciples,
Notice that he didn't tell them
he would keep them safe.

He didn't promise them
that no harm would ever come to them.

He didn't say that following him
meant an end to all their troubles.

In fact, just the opposite was true.
But what he told them
Was that they needed to leave that locked room
And go out into the world,
And witness to what they'd seen.

It was a world where they would meet all kinds of trouble
But that's what he wanted them to do.

And one more thing:
He told them they didn't need to be afraid.

He was sending them on a mission
And that mission would take them
into some dark, scary, dangerous places.

But whatever happened to them,
they need not be afraid.

Because no matter where they were,
he would with be with them.

No locked door,
no prison,
no dungeon,
no corner of hell
could keep him out.

And whatever pain they experienced,
he would help them bear.

Whatever hunger they felt,
he would feel it with them.

Whatever mountain they had to climb,
he would be there climbing with them,
giving them strength.

Whatever long night they shuddered through,
he would be there beside them,
giving them courage.

It's the same promise Jesus still makes
to his followers today.

If you follow Jesus,
don't expect to make all your problems go away.

Jesus won't guarantee you
that he'll get you home safe,
or prevent your house from catching fire,
or keep you from getting cancer,
or protect you from a runaway semi truck on I-70,
or make sure you live a long life and die in your sleep.

Jesus promises none of those things.
Life, in all its harsh realities,
is going to happen to us.
There will be times when we suffer.
Some of us will suffer greatly.
Sometimes we will carry very heavy burdens.

We will confront demons.
Demons like addiction.
Demons like health problems or mental problems.
Demons like estrangement from family members and broken relationships.
Demons like divorce or job loss or bankruptcy.
Some of us will be nailed to those crosses
just as surely as the disciples were nailed to theirs.

But when that happens,
Jesus promises that we need not be fearful.
Because he is with us always.

And he will give us the courage
to face what we need to face,
The strength to endure
what we need to endure.

There is no place we can be
where Jesus cannot reach us.
No locked door that can keep him out.
No storm he cannot calm.
No fear he cannot quiet.
No suffering he cannot understand and share.

Our Lord still comes to us
and offers us peace.
Not security.
But peace.
And then sends us out
into the violent, scary world
To be a witness to the truth that is in us.

You have the truth within you.
“Why are you frightened?”
“Peace be with you.”
Amen.