



WEEKLY STUDY April 23-29, 2023

(Use this guide to individually or with a group dive deeper into this week's sermon.)

Easter

On Easter Sunday we joined our voices with Christians world-wide proclaiming, "Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Hallelujah!" But Easter is more than one Sunday. Easter is a season in the Christian Year – continuing until May 28, Pentecost Sunday – where the scripture centers on the appearances of Jesus after resurrection. This Sunday is the Third Sunday of the Easter season.

Our scripture is: John 20:19-23

"When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, 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 are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"

- 1) In this season of Easter, it's important to keep reading the stories of Jesus' appearing to the disciples. It reminds us that Easter isn't a "one and done" Sunday. the stories of Jesus' appearing to the disciples are rich with meaning and importance. Carefully read again the scripture from Sunday. Put a "?" by what puzzles you. Put an "!" by what surprises you. Underline what you feel is important for you to remember.

Question: *What puzzled you in the scripture? What surprised you? What do you want to remember?*

- 2) Last Sunday was "Worship Without Walls." Pastor Sam told some of the stories of outreach done by the congregation on that Sunday. Easter Sunday is a great in-gathering. We all come together to celebrate, to worship, to rejoice in the assurance that Jesus overcame death and there is ever-lasting life in the presence of God. The second Sunday of the Easter season for the last two years has been "Worship without Walls." The scripture for that Sunday was John 21:15-21 where Jesus asks Peter three

times, “Peter do you love me?” Each time Peter says yes, Jesus then says to him, “Feed My Sheep.” Worship Without Walls lives out our “yes” to Jesus’ question, “Do you love me.” It is one of the ways we witness – by asking nothing of those we are serving, but by showing God’s love in simple gestures of food, of notes, of labor, of song, of comfort.

Question: In what ways will you continue the witness of “worship without walls” through the coming weeks and months to continue your response to Jesus’ request: “Feed My Sheep.”

- 3) Today’s scripture identified a central issue we have with the disciples. We often find ourselves overcome by the feelings of danger around us and all we want to do is close the door and hide. Jesus invites us to open the doors – but not alone. In the scripture he breathes on each of the disciples, giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit. (This is a reminder that the Pentecost story isn’t the only place in scripture where people receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.) When we are afraid; when we want to lock the doors and stay protected but removed from life, Jesus reminds us that this is NOT living. Living requires us to open the doors. To step out into the beauty, the danger, the love, discord – to all that is in the world in order to truly live. But we are not alone. We have the gift of a companion, a comforter, an advocate, and as Pastor Sam said, a truth teller – the Holy Spirit. And through breathing ourselves – breathing in calm; breathing out worry – we often can center ourselves enough to open the door for another day.

Question: Consider the gift of the Holy Spirit. How do you identify the presence of the spirit in your life? What do you do to help yourself remember you are not alone – God is with you?

- 4) Pastor Sam addressed one of those statements in today’s scripture that always has troubled me: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” I was helped in my understanding when Sam linked this back to The Lord’s Prayer, “...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” It reminded me that God’s forgiveness is God’s to give, but in order to move forward, I have to forgive the sins of others before I can move forward. Sam said, “We choose to retain or we choose to let go.” It was a good reminder to me that in holding on to my grievances I have chosen in some way to stay behind a shut door and be dominated by fear.

Question: What are the things that stand in the way of you fully opening the door to life more fully lived? Who (yourself, people, political leaders, family members) do you need to forgive in order to be able to step back into life?

Prayer: (This prayer is found in the book *Openings: A Daybook of Saints, Psalms, and Prayers* by Larry James Peacock, page 110.)

“God of openness and new life, in this Easter season,
Remove me from the tombs of doubt and despair,
Turn me from dead ends and shattered dreams,
And lead me to new hope and a bright tomorrow.
Walk with me down uncharted roads and ordinary paths,

Always leading me to a deeper trust and more faithful service.
I open my heart to your Easter joy. Amen”

Weekly Challenge: In the Christian Church, we celebrate the season of Easter until Pentecost Sunday. This year, make Easter more than a day. Start each day by saying “Christ is Risen. Christ is risen indeed” to yourself or to others. Pray daily the Lord’s Prayer, taking time to consider those you need to forgive who have trespassed against you.

(Weekly study guide prepared by Rev. MaryJane Pierce Norton)