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## “Gifts of Easter Evening”

A sermon by T. Melvin Williams, Jr.

Second Sunday of Easter (Year B)

April 12, 2015

John 20:19–31

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I’m honored to be with you. Thank you, Marilyn, for the invitation. We Baptists have many friends here, so I feel at home. Periodically, I see one of your members, *Mal King*, at the Lakewood Y. One day I asked him, “How are things at First Pres in this interim period?” He said, “We’re fine. We’re just trying to do what Jesus told us to do.” That statement is an enormous tribute to this congregation—“trying to do what Jesus told us to do.” For all of us in this community: thank you.

Some of you may say today, “Easter is over. We can now go back to business as usual, back to a normal Sunday.” I have been sent here today to inform you that Easter is not over.

The truth is that every Sunday is Easter. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection. One Sunday following Easter a few years ago before worship, I was standing on the sidewalk out in front of Watts Street Baptist Church. I looked up and saw a man walking by, enjoying a brisk stroll. I had never seen him before; but without breaking his stride, he reached out and shook my hand, singing as he reached, “Thank God, I’m alive!” Then he kept on walking. His spontaneous greeting was another sign that the Easter season is continuing! I believe that the reason we go to church, beneath all other reasons, is that we come here to come alive again. The early Christians prayed, “God, remove the deadness. Make me fully alive.” That’s the resurrection spirit! “Thank God, I’m alive!”

Every worship service here is a weekly Easter. Every Sunday is Easter, and the six Sundays following Easter Day form the season called the “Great Fifty Days,” a period when we focus on the resurrection, the appearances of the risen Jesus.

For this Second Sunday in Easter, we are given an Easter evening text from the Gospel of John. “It was evening on ... the first day of the week.” The disciples are behind locked doors; they are paralyzed by fear and doubt. Jesus comes and stands among them, an unexpected visit, a surprise.

What does he say to his anxious, fearful friends? It seems to me that he is doing what any good leader does. He leads by being what Edwin Friedman calls “a non-anxious presence.” He leads by remaining calm. He leads by stating clearly where he stands on crucial matters. He leads by giving encouragement to his people.

This morning our text includes the fascinating story of Thomas and his so-called doubt. (Doubt, I believe, is a richer form of faith: “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” Or as Fredrick Buechner puts it: “Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith.”)

Thomas was Honest Thomas. He was not present when Jesus made this surprise visit to the disciples on Easter evening. But I have wondered if his doubt was softened when the disciples first told him what he had missed. So, Thomas missed Jesus’ first appearance to the disciples after his resurrection, and he wanted some proof. He wanted to see and touch Jesus’ nail-scarred hands—which he did eight days later—but I still wonder how Thomas processed what the disciples told him about Jesus’ Easter evening visit. Likewise, we doubting Baptists and Presbyterians may be so fascinated with Thomas that we could miss the gifts that are wrapped in this text about Jesus’ visit.

What happened on that visit is remarkable! Jesus comes in the door where the disciples are gathered; they’re surely distressed about Jesus’ death, and they are shocked and elated when he walks in the door.

The text tells us that he came in the door on Easter evening, and he gave them four gifts.

1. The first gift he brought was **peace**. Twice in this account, Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” and he says it a third time in the Thomas story. The word Jesus used is “*Shalom*,” that wonderful, earthy Hebrew word that has an expansive meaning where peace includes enough food, shelter, a piece of land, health, prosperity, no more war—as well as inner peace. *Shalom* is what we seek for all our Durham residents, especially the least privileged.

The disciples were anxious and afraid; and Jesus says “*Shalom*,” which means the end of fear. The Scripture says, “They shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.” The disciples can see the scars, the nail prints, in Jesus’ hands, and they hear him say, “*Shalom*.” But *shalom* is not a guarantee that the worst will not happen. *Shalom* is the assurance that when the worst does happen, God will be with us to show us the way through it. In the times of crisis, grief, distress, Jesus says, “*Shalom*.”

There are times in worship when we participate in “The passing of the peace/shalom” ritual. Why do we do that? It’s more than a friendly greeting. It’s more than saying, “Have a nice day.” We reach out to one another and say, “The peace of Christ be with you.” When we say that, we mean the same that Jesus meant. When **we** disciples are afraid and despairing, Jesus passes **us** shalom, the peace of God. Likewise, when we gather, we pass it on to each other. We share the gift that Jesus gave to us that evening. As the saying goes, “The only way you can have it is to give it away.” The peace of God is like that. We give it away to one another—to be internalized in our inner life.

2. The second gift Jesus gave was **a commission**, a job to do, a mission: “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” Some scholars have said that this verse is one of the most important verses in the Gospel. The word “sent” tolls like a bell through almost every chapter of John’s gospel. On almost every page Jesus declares that he has been *sent* into the world by God. This means that his will is not his own, but God’s: “I seek not my own will, but the will of the one who *sent* me.” He speaks not his own words, but God’s. “My food is to do the will of the One who *sent* me...” Jesus’ very life depends on the Sender. “God *sent* not his Son to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved (John 3:17).”

Now on Easter evening, Jesus comes to the disciples, and with one brief sentence he transfers his sending, his mission, into the hands of the disciples. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus is entrusting his mission to the disciples, to us. We disciples are now sent to continue the mission of Jesus. And let’s remind each other that the first sentence of Jesus’ mission is in Luke 4, his first sermon, first sentence: “The Spirit has anointed me—sent me—to preach good news to... **the poor.**” The second gift is a commissioning: I send you to continue my mission, my work in the world.

3. The third gift is **power**. Jesus did not send the disciples without resources to do the job. He gives them the power—not ordinary human power, but the power of the Holy Spirit. Not long ago I talked to someone from another congregation who said, “I was still new in the church. And they named me chair of Church Council. The church was in the midst of a terrible controversy. People were choosing sides. And I was given the job to lead them through it. I was not prepared, not equipped to do it. So I prayed, and God sent me what was needed. God gave me the strength, the guidance.”

There are times when we are *sent* to do something we don’t feel able to do. But God gives us the resources we need when we need them. The text says that Jesus “*breathed* on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Those words sound a lot like the words of Genesis: at the creation God *breathed* into human nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living creature. God sends the Spirit by *breathing* into us the vitality, power, strength beyond our own. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” Jesus says. He’s saying “It’s my spirit, my energy, my power—in **you.**”

4. The fourth gift is astonishing, radical, revolutionary. Jesus gives the disciples—us—**the authority to forgive sins**. “If you forgive people’s sins,” Jesus says, “they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:23).

This is a radical claim! The people of Jesus’ day believed that only God could forgive sins. One of the major charges against Jesus by the religious leaders was that he forgave sins. Probably the major reason Jesus was crucified is that he forgave sins. “Blasphemy,” they said. “Only God forgives sins.” But now Jesus is

pushing this new understanding even further. He is giving to the people, his disciples, to *us*, the authority to forgive sins. Daring, bold, and life-giving!

If we think back to the time of Martin Luther, people were paying money to have their sins forgiven. That's why Luther opposed the sale of indulgences, which was a corruption of Jesus' gift. Then Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together* helped us understand that we need to hear our forgiveness from human lips. In his little underground seminary in Finkenwald, Germany, Bonhoeffer said that hearing confession was not to be done by priests only.

So Bonhoeffer restored the practice of making confession of sin to the *community*, to us. The authority to hear confessions and offer forgiveness is not limited to priests (clergy) alone; it's an authority that belongs to the community. It was a gift from Jesus himself.

This is why each Sunday in many churches we have a time of personal confession, corporate confession and the assurance of pardon. It's offered on many Sundays not by an ordained minister, but by lay persons. The authority to forgive sins was given to all of us on Easter evening.

These four gifts are amazing—peace, a commission, power, and authority to forgive.

We are a community of faith because of these gifts Jesus gave us on Easter evening. After the crucifixion the disciples were so bereft that they locked their doors. But Jesus figures out a way to get in the door, and he stands among them. Their gloom turns to gladness, and he gives them these gifts. Jesus is awakening these qualities—these gifts—that lie within them, within us. He awakens these gifts within us!

I wonder if we asked the ushers now to go and lock all the doors to this sanctuary. Would that keep Jesus out of here? I believe he is determined to be here with us. And he comes among us with gifts: "Peace be with you." (*Shalom*) "As God has sent me, I send you." "Receive the Holy Spirit." "If you forgive sins, they are forgiven."

In this Easter season, he still gives us these gifts—peace, a commission, power, authority to forgive. Doubting Thomas surely heard his fellow disciples’ report about these four gifts. And I wonder if he received the four gifts. I wonder.

And the question for us is: Will we receive the gifts?

Amen. So may it be.

*Acknowledgment: to Al Winn, esteemed Presbyterian, for the format and central ideas for this sermon.*

### **Benediction**

May the Lord make her face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God give you grace never to sell yourself short,

Grace to risk something good,

Grace to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth  
and too small for anything but love.

So, may God take our minds and think through them.

May God take our lips and speak through them.

May God take our hearts and set them on fire

for the sake of God’s love and justice and peace  
in our city and in our world.

Amen.

—Adapted from William Sloane Coffin, Jr.

*The Reverend T. Melvin Williams, Jr. had retired after 24 years as pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham in March 2012. Following his retirement from WSBC, he provides leadership for End Poverty Durham, working under the umbrella of MDC, a long-time anti-poverty agency in downtown Durham. He holds a Bachelor’s degree from Wake Forest University and a Master’s of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School. He is married to Jan Adams Williams, director of Healthy Families Durham. They have two children: Jenna, a music therapist, and Mark, who holds a Master’s degree in vocal performance from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Mel is also a singer, a longtime member of Bloomsbury, a folk-singing group in Raleigh. He also has been known to sing in the middle of his sermons.*

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