

As this Easter season continues, today we hear about another encounter of the risen Jesus with his followers. “*Peace be with you,*” Jesus says to them. They “disbelieve for joy;” and think they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus invites them to see that ghosts don’t eat broiled fish!

These appearances of the risen Jesus brought a profound experience of God’s forgiveness for his fickle friends. On that terrible Friday, all the disciples ran away, and Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. But, encountering the risen Christ transformed their lives. And not just the first disciples. Paul was changed from persecutor to apostle, and James the brother of the Lord, who was apparently not a follower of the earthly Jesus, became a leader of the Jerusalem church. The peace of the risen Jesus offered a release from the shame and failure of that fateful Friday. And that freeing peace of Christ transformed them into missionaries and even martyrs for the gospel.

The disciples are to preach repentance and forgiveness to “*all the nations.*” In the first chapter of Luke, Zachariah had promised that Jesus would give his people “knowledge of salvation *through the forgiveness of their sins.*” The dying Jesus prays for forgiveness for his executioners; and the mission of the risen Christ now *extends* this forgiveness to all people.

Forgiveness remains at the core of the good news that we have to share. It helps to be reminded just how very powerful it can be to forgive others. Every year, the world marks Holocaust Remembrance Day, recalling that the Nazis during World War II brutally exterminated 11 million people, 6 million of them Jews. Some years ago in Evansville, I got the chance to hear Eva Kor share her story of surviving the horrors of the Nazi death camps. She was a 10-year-old Romanian Jew when her family was killed at Auschwitz. The only reason she and her twin sister Miriam were allowed to live was to become human lab rats for Dr. Joseph Mengele’s terrible experiments, where one twin was given unknown toxic or experimental substances or diseases, and the other twin would serve as a control. Mengele reportedly used 1,500 sets of twins in his experiments, and only an estimated 180 to 250 individuals survived.

I have seen that *Terre Haute* is proud to have had Eva as a resident. Her son was featured on the local news last night. Eva founded the Candles Holocaust Museum and Education Center here in Terre Haute. C.A.N.D.L.E.S. (*Children of Auschwitz Nazi Deadly Lab Experiment Survivors*) searched for other survivors, and attempted to document their experiences. This process led Eva to do extensive research on Dr. Mengele, and to file lawsuits against German and international companies that reportedly benefited from Mengele’s experiments.

When I first heard her speak, Eva shared about Dr. Hans Muench, who had been a Nazi doctor working with Mengele. She said that she met with Dr. Muench in his home, and that he treated her with respect, and tried to answer the many questions that she had about what had been done to her and to her sister. The doctor wrote out a first-hand account of what happened, and in appreciation, Eva said she “*was going to give him little letter of forgiveness, from me to him.*” But with that token action, surprisingly she discovered the power of forgiveness.

She said “I found I could heal my pain and deal with the baggage of the Holocaust through forgiveness. . . For the first time in my life, I felt free from the pain of 50 years. I was no longer a prisoner of my tragic past. . . . I hope that somehow, I can impress people to help them forgive their worst enemy. It will heal your soul and set you free.”

I also ran across stories of Mrs. Kor’s testimony nine years ago in Luneburg, Germany, in the trial of 93-year-old Oskar Groening. He was known as the “Bookkeeper of Auschwitz” because it was his responsibility to track and ship the valuables of the doomed back to the SS in Berlin. Late in his life, he had begun to share about his role in the camps, although it led to his trial, because he saw the “fake news” propaganda of the Holocaust deniers. Eva said Mr. Groening bore responsibility for helping to run the wartime concentration camp – but urged him to spend his last days teaching others about the evil of Nazism. *“He is 93 years old. Putting him in jail is absurd. But he can do some good...”* Oskar Groening was convicted of contributing to the murder of 300,000 Jews; he died, after an appeals process and before he could begin serving his sentence.

Not surprisingly, Eva was criticized by other victims and their families for her public forgiveness. “They called me a traitor. When I talk to survivors, and I ask ‘*why on earth does my forgiveness hurt you?*’ they have no answers.” She explained: “You cannot be free from what was done to you unless you remove from your shoulder the daily burden of pain and anger and *forgive the Nazis* – telling yourself that it is *not because they deserve it, but because I deserve it.*”

The writer Anne Lamont, in her work *“Traveling Mercies,”* comments that forgiveness is *“giving up the hope of having had a better past.”* I like that. Today’s second lesson reminds us that we are God’s children now, and what we *will be* has not yet been revealed. We don’t know what the future will look like, and indeed, we may not always be convinced about the present. We may share with the disciples a past marred by shameful failure or betrayal. Or we may have been the victim of another person’s betrayal or brutality. *But* we know NOW who we are, God’s children, freed by the peace and forgiveness that Jesus promises us, empowered for the vitally important task of witnessing.

You are my witnesses, Jesus tells his friends. And what a change in those disciples from the terrified mourners, still hiding out, huddled together behind those locked doors! Our First Lesson shows how much they had changed! Check out their bold witnessing. And what happened to transform them? They are met by the one they had abandoned to die alone. And what of the guilt that *you know* they were feeling? There was no denying it. Yet, the risen Jesus had sought them out; they knew that Jesus had forgiven them, and they were discovering that the past was giving way to a new future. As Jesus suddenly stood in their midst, well, they were amazed. The miracle of Resurrection had happened. They hadn’t looked for it, and they surely didn’t expect it. In spite of the fact that Jesus kept predicting it. Yet, the proof stood before them calmly eating a piece of fish!

“*Why are you frightened?*” Jesus asks his disciples, “*why do doubts arise in your hearts?*” Well, the first disciples doubted, and they had Jesus *right there in person*. Jesus doesn’t reject anyone for doubting. “*Check out my hands and feet. Give me that fish over there.*” Luke says that Jesus gave his startled, terrified, doubting disciples what they needed. “And while they still disbelieved for joy and wondered,” he ate before them. Yes, this *is* our Jesus, here, alive, risen from the dead!

It was a *teachable* moment; “*Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures,*” the text tells us. All these frightful things they had endured were leading up to this moment when the risen Jesus stood before them. Jesus wove his friends into the tapestry of grace. Everything God had done *now* depended on each one of them. “*You are my witnesses.*” They have a message to share. And so do we.

God doesn't leave us as orphans in this witnessing. We are God's children, NOW. As we live out our mission to share the love of Christ in the world, God’s people are promised the resources we need to carry out that mission. Those forgiven disciples who ate fish with Jesus were not yet what they would become. They *became* bold witnesses of the things which God showed them. Their witness has reached us. And like a relay race run through time and space, they have handed off the baton to us; now *we* are eyewitnesses to God’s presence and power and promise in our world. God will lead us to become what has not yet been revealed.

When we thought we were alone, abandoned, the Holy Spirit shows us that we journey surrounded by others who can help us. We eat together, anticipating that final feast, when Jesus will appear and we will see him as he is. We are God's plan for passing the baton, for sharing the Good News in our homes and workplaces, in our neighborhoods and our friendships, in our working relationships, so we see in the other person God’s own beloved one. God will provide what we need to run the race, and God will pick us up and dust us off when we stumble. Take the baton; trust God’s power to renew our life and sustain our hope. *Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed. Alleluia.* And so, take that Good News with you from this place, put it to work this week. You are the witnesses of the peace and power of Easter life. Go do it.