

## ***Peace and Forgiveness in the Midst of Fear***

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024 – John 20:19-30)

As we move from Easter to Pentecost we will hear many stories of the encounters of people with the Risen Christ, with the resurrected Jesus.

In our story today we are confronted with fear, with peace and with forgiveness.

The women, despite what Mark described as fear and awe, have made their way back to Galilee to tell the gathered disciples of what they have seen and heard at the empty tomb.

The disciples, or at least some of them, Judas is no longer there, and we are told Thomas is not present, have gathered hiding in a room. Hiding from the world, hiding from the authorities, hiding because of fear.

Thomas was not there, was he even more scared than they about what the future held? Was he simply confused? Perhaps he is angry, angry at Peter and his denial, angry about all that Judas has done, angry at himself as he, just like the others, had fled in Jesus' hour of need.

It is into this cauldron of fear that Jesus enters. And what is his first act, he greets them with a word of peace, a gesture perhaps of reconciliation and forgiveness. And he doesn't do it just once, he does it twice, as he greets this scared little bunch. He shows them his wounds, perhaps to convince them that it is really him.

He then gives them a task, a very significant task – go into the world as I am sending you, just as God sent me and as you go forgive people, don't hold back on the forgiveness. Jesus knows a thing or two about forgiveness – he had taught them during his earthly life that you just don't forgive someone once, twice or even seven times, you keep on doing it. He has taught them about it as he told the story of the two sons. He has cried it out from the cross – Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do. Forgiveness it would seem is central to the message of Jesus.

Then a week later, when Thomas is brave enough to meet with them all, he hears what has happened, and I guess wants to see for himself, just as Jesus had shown the others his wounds the previous week. Thomas has for so long got a bad wrap for not believing, but really, he just wanted to see as they had the week before. Again, Jesus appears in their midst and his first act is to offer a word of peace, a word of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Jesus, then I want to argue, in a gesture of forgiveness offers to show Thomas his wounds. At this point he is not chastised, he is just offered what he needed, to see for himself. We are not told if Thomas even needs to see the wounds, perhaps the offer is enough and then he makes his confession of faith – My Lord and My God. Then he and the others are told that there will be others who will come to believe without seeing and that folks, is us. We have not seen in the way they did, but we too have come to the same conclusion as Thomas – My Lord and My God.

In the midst of their fear, Jesus offers peace and forgiveness.

We are Easter people too. And we too are given the same three-fold task.

1. Offer a word of peace – how much the world needs this. Peace is an act of love, of acceptance, of understanding. We don't have to agree with each other, but we do need to accept that each person has a worldview which may be different to ours, but we can try to understand it.
2. Forgive – now this is not easy, but for Christians it is essential. It is just as hard to receive as it is to give. Forgiveness is powerful, it changes situations and frees people. It doesn't mean condoning unacceptable behaviour. It might mean owning up to our own failures and shortcomings. It might mean having to be genuinely sorry and accepting that another is genuinely sorry. Desmond Tutu says these are the three hardest words to say.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that forgiveness will liberate the soul, remove the fear and it is that which makes it a powerful weapon.<sup>2</sup> Jesus, I think knew its power.

Forgiveness will lead to action, to doing things differently, to reconciliation and ultimately to peace and life.

3. Go out into the world as sent people to bring the good news and the life it leads to. The scared little band of disciples cannot remain in that upper room fearful of life. They are sent out into the world speaking words of peace to transform the world, and so are we. We cannot remain in our little enclave, we need to go out into the world as we have a message that the world really needs to hear. We can do this as we too like those disciples have been given a gift to enable this. The gift of the Holy Spirit will embolden, energise, strengthen and give us the wisdom needed to share the good news of God's love, that will lead to fulness of life for others.

May your encounter with the risen Christ change you. May fear become boldness. May doubt become belief. May you proclaim a message of peace and reconciliation to all those around you, indeed to the whole world. May you be transformed and in turn help transform the world.

Peace be with you. Salaam. Peace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu: 'I am sorry' – the three hardest words to say <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/mar/22/archbishop-desmond-tutu-sorry-hard-to-say> Accessed 10th April, 2021

<sup>2</sup> Ibid