

***The Intruder* – John 20:19-31**

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“Why us?” is a question we often ask ourselves—when good things happen and when not so good things happen.

We also wonder why it is that others receive the fate they find in life. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why are some people, so good-natured and giving of themselves, suddenly afflicted with terrible illness or misfortune? Why are the ones whom we think should be deserving of good things often the ones who have to endure pain and heartache?

Likewise, we often selfishly wonder why it is that the ones our human minds think are the least deserving of blessing are also the ones who strike it big with good things. How many of us haven't known someone who “lucks into” a good job or good fortune? And we say to ourselves, “There's no way he or she deserves this.”

Later on that first Easter day, we could ask of the disciples, “Why them? Why such good fortune for them that Jesus would appear?”

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, the text says, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among *them* and said, “Peace be with you.”

First of all, as a side note, when we read that phrase “for fear of the Jews,” we have to acknowledge that that phrase has often been used to fuel antisemitism over centuries. It's true that the followers of Jesus who wrote

John's gospel were themselves Jews, villainizing other Jews. When we hear "the Jews" it seems and feels almost like a slur. And it can allow us to forget that Jesus and his followers were themselves Jews.

In Jesus' time, and especially when this gospel was written, there were large rifts between the Jews who followed Jesus and those who did not. The disciples' fear here in this narrative is likely that someone might report the Jesus-following Jews, which could result in more crucifixions.

Despite this understanding and while the true villains throughout the New Testament period were the Roman authorities, whose reign of terror created a culture of fear in which everyone was afraid of everyone, we should acknowledge that this term "fear of THE Jews" has been used to promulgate hate for Jewish people for centuries.

Anyway, back to the story.

The greeting Jesus uses here as he enters the locked house, "Peace be with you," was more than just a how 'ya doing or how's it goin'. The Hebrew term speaks, in effect, of the salvation that Christ's redemptive work will achieve for his disciples — total well-being and peace of mind or peace of the spirit.

Why does Jesus share this peace with them, though? Why is it that the disciples should be greeted with the reassurance that Christ's redemptive work would achieve for them well-being and inner rest of spirit? After all, these were the same disciples who did not run up to defend him during his trial. In many ways, they abandoned him.

They were cowering in fear. Why did they deserve to have the risen Christ appear to them and give them his peace?

In a sense, these disciples, in this house at this time, represented the early church of Jesus Christ. They were a rag-tag band of fearful disciples, hiding behind locked doors, but they were followers of Jesus, what we could define as a church.

Methodist bishop Will Willimon says of this group: “This church...has no sanctuary, no pulpit, no choir. It has no plan, no mission, no conviction. And yet, this is where Jesus chooses to appear. Nothing that the disciples can do or not do is strong enough to keep Jesus out.”

Naturally, Jesus’ appearance to this early church commands us to find our place in this drama.

Like the disciples who cowered in fear with the doors locked, we must ask ourselves if, in fact, we aren’t, in our own cowardice, reluctant to letting this intruder, Jesus Christ, come into our lives and be at the center of all we do.

Churches should never be first and foremost about programs and projects, organizations and growth strategies. It should be about Christ, the one who has chosen, despite our sin and cowardice, to come to our house and share with us his peace.

“A brand new pastor began work at his first congregation and within the first week, two members died. In the next week, there were two more deaths. In his first month, he had presided over eight memorial services. Consequently, his time had been greatly limited and his sermon preparation took a toll. So he simply preached that

first Sunday's sermon over and over again across the next three Sundays.

Well, the leadership of the congregation sought out the presbytery's leadership to complain. 'What should we do? This new pastor has used the same sermon four times in a row!'

One of the presbytery leaders was indeed surprised, but after a moment asked them what the sermon was about. The members were puzzled over this simple question. They hemmed and hawed, but they really couldn't remember.

One of the presbytery leaders then declared, 'Let him use it one more time.'"

And if Christ, who desires to be a true intruder in all we do and say, was the central message of that sermon preached four times in a row, it would've not been inappropriate.

In seminary, we all were required to take a short course on how to do funerals. And the professor who taught the course was adamant about one thing. You may talk about the deceased all you want, he said. You may sing familiar songs and sentimental hymns. All this is permissible. But, one thing you *shall* do: Preach the gospel.

The gospel is about a risen Christ who intrudes on the lives of people whom we may not deem worthy of his presence. And that presence comes through the words spoken to us by a loving community but also through the actions of a loving community. This is how Jesus often intrudes.

This coming Saturday is the annual Posies for the Pantry sale to benefit the Shepherd of Hope Food Pantry.

Many of you are going to volunteer in this effort on Saturday and in the days leading up to it. And you're going to work hard with the end game being to raise needed funds to help fight hunger in our community. That's how the intruder Jesus will be made known.

Many others of you do the same kind of work in other ministries of the church or through other organizations you're part of—all designed to represent the intrusion of a living Christ in our world.

This Christ, who lived as we live and suffered like we suffer, this Christ who died and who now lives, this Christ who promises resurrection for all who call on his name, is the one who comes to us and speaks compassion and peace as we cower in our fear and trepidation.

Once again, from Will Willimon, the church flourishes because “church isn't my hard work, your earnest effort, our long-range planning or heavy duty giving. Church is a gift, a visitation, an intrusion of the Living Christ standing among us.”

Jesus chose to stand before the disciples, and he chooses to stand among us too. For his determination to intrude into our life together, thanks be to God. Amen.