

Sunday – May 1, 2011  
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook  
Sermon – **Jesus Returns**

St. Matthias UMC  
Fredericksburg, Va 22405  
www.stmathiasumc.org

**Scripture: John 20:19-31**

Easter morning (in John): Empty tomb, Jesus appears to Mary and tells her to tell “my brothers” that he is ascending. In verse 18, she does.

Easter evening: the disciples, his “brothers”, are hiding in a house with the doors locked. Why? What does this mean that they are hiding just hours after Peter and the “disciple Jesus loved” see that the tomb is empty, and getting the report from Mary that she had seen the Lord?

It is very easy for us to look back 2,000 years and say, “If *I* had seen the empty tomb or heard that two of my closest friends had seen it, or if someone I knew and respected told me she had seen and spoken with the Lord after my brothers had seen the empty tomb, *I* would not be hiding in fear.”

But, wouldn't we? Is our faith that strong? Are we more committed to the ministry of Jesus Christ than the original disciples were? How could we tell? We are in ***no danger at all*** as Christians in a nation that is made up very predominantly of Christians. Nobody is spying on us to see if we go to church on Sunday morning. Say what you will about the supposed War on Christmas or the War on Easter; the only thing that will kill the church in America is the apathy of church members - people who joined the church and ***vowed*** to support it with their prayers, their presence, their gifts and their service, but are rarely seen or heard from by their church. They will toll the death knell of the church long before any liberal/socialist/communist/humanist/atheist conspiracy will.

So, let's not judge those eleven men hiding behind locked doors. They were afraid that, if the authorities killed their leader, their master, why wouldn't they kill them, too? For all they knew, they were all wanted men, fugitives from justice. They couldn't be sure, but they weren't taking any chances.

Then, Jesus appears to them, suddenly and without having to open the locked doors. They rejoice as he gives them his peace twice. He tells them God had sent him, and he breathed on them, giving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Then, he tells them, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

What in the world does that mean? It sounds like they, and we, are being given a whole lot of power over a whole lot of people. We get to choose whose sins are forgiven, and whose are not. It may even be up to us who goes to heaven and who goes to hell, buried under a pile of unforgiven sins.

And, maybe that’s okay with us. We’d like to choose who we’ll be spending eternity with. So, we’ll forgive the sins of the people we like - quite often those would be people who are a lot like us - and we can choose not to forgive people we *don’t* like, people who are *not* like us. And, that way, we can make heaven the way we’d like it to be, full of people we choose. And hell can be full of the other people. Good riddance.

But, what if that’s not what it means? I mean, forgiving sins is clear enough. We forgive the sinners, and their sins are forgotten by us and by God. However, that part about retaining sins is a little murkier. What if, by not forgiving sins, *we* are the ones who retain them? What if, by refusing to forgive sins, *we* are the ones who carry them through this life and into the next?

At the risk of beating a dead horse, Jesus wants us to love *everyone*, including our enemies. He also tells us not to judge people, so we might not be judged. Refusing to forgive an enemy for sinning against us is very judgmental and not very loving at all. And God knows when we are genuinely forgiving someone and when we are just pretending to so He won’t get mad at us.

So, it would fit very nicely in with everything Jesus has taught in his earthly life, if we retain someone’s sins doesn’t mean *they* are retaining their sins, but *we* are retaining their sins. By being unforgiving and judgmental, we are choosing to bear the weight of all the sins we refuse to forgive.

That sort of grudge-bearing is like acid in our soul. Acid, eating away at everything good within us, corrupting our view of the world, corroding our values, polluting our use of the name “Christian.”

The unwillingness to forgive others is indicative of our sense of superiority, maybe even perfection, putting ourselves in the place of God, who is the only one who has the right to judge. We take our imperfection and try to do God's job with our angry hearts. And all we do is make ourselves miserable, and weigh ourselves down with the weight Jesus wants to lift from us, and replace with *his* yoke.

Love and forgiveness. If we love the way Christ taught us and lived for us and the way he loves us, forgiveness will not only be easier, we would see that it is the best approach to our relationships. Otherwise, we'll drift into being unforgiving and judgmental, and of very little use to God.