

The Ego and the Holy Spirit
John 20:1-23
April 21, 2019 – 10:30 a.m. – Easter Sunday

The twentieth chapter of John's Gospel is one of the richest chapters in the entire New Testament. It's the longest and most detailed of the resurrection accounts – full of meaning and symbolism. Our reading for today, which is only the first half of the chapter can easily be broken into three sections. First, we have the discovery of the empty tomb. Then we have Jesus appearing to Mary, his instruction not to hold on to him, but to go and tell the disciples of the resurrection. Finally, we read of Jesus' appearance to the disciples behind locked doors.

Now, I've preached on this text every Easter for the past eight years. It's a wonderful text. It's a rich text. It's a meaningful text. It's a text I have studied extensively and written about and know extremely well. But this year, as I thought about what I would say about this text, I could not help but think of the book I've been reading. I've mentioned it several times in the past month or so: *A Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson. Williamson states that we can either live out of our Ego or out of the Holy Spirit. Now, I need to start by saying, "Don't take the word 'Ego' in the academic, psychological, Freudian sense of the word; and don't take "Holy Spirit" in the purely theological, trinitarian sense of the word." Williamson uses the word "Ego" to simply mean the self and, to a large extent, the self-protective self. And, what Williamson calls the "Holy Spirit," I might simply call "the Holy" or "the Divine" – or the essence of God that lives in each of us, lives in us by virtue of our being created in God's holy image.

And so, I thought about the twentieth chapter of John; and there's Mary, standing at the tomb weeping because someone has stolen the body. And when Jesus appears to her, she doesn't even recognize him. Now I don't want to be too tough on Mary. Who among us, given her circumstances would not be doing likewise. She has just lost her closest friend; she is grieving deeply. I understand that; and I'm compassionate toward Mary, as I try to be compassionate for the people I meet in her circumstances today. But the fact is, Mary is working out of her ego. Mary is wrapped up in her own grief and loss. That's okay. I tell you, she's allowed to be there. But what happens next?

Jesus calls her name, and she recognizes him; and she grabs on to him; and Jesus says: "Don't hold on to me." What's that about? Scholars have written a lot about this verse alone; and there is very little agreement as to its meaning; but, having recently read Williamson's book and finding application to this text, I submit that maybe it's about Mary being a little too much about Mary. Maybe it's about Mary wanting to hang on to Jesus for herself, instead of being about the mission of sharing the Good News of God's amazing love. Maybe there's a little too much of Mary's ego in the hanging on of Jesus and not enough of the Holy Spirit.

And so, the Gospel continues. Jesus tells Mary to go tell the disciples about the resurrection, and then he appears to them behind the locked doors. And we have what has sometimes been called the Johanne Pentecost. Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Now, we'll celebrate Pentecost in seven weeks; but today, I look to Williamson's use of that term "Holy Spirit." In short, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God's Love. The Holy Spirit is God, and the first letter of John tells us that "God is love." Divine Love is the energy to fuels the universe and the energy that fuels our very souls. Divine love is the energy that calls for compassion and forgiveness and understanding. It is the love that calls for care and concern for others, all others. Indeed, John tells us that without love we are nothing. And so, at Easter, Jesus fuels the disciples with divine love.

Friends, I tell you that no one who knows their Bible well can read of Jesus breathing on the disciples, and telling them to receive the Holy Spirit without thinking of the second chapter of Genesis, where God breathes the breath of life into Adam. The breath of life, the Spirit of divine love, the Holy Spirit, that's exactly what Jesus breathes into his disciples.

So what about you and what about me? If you were at our 8:00 service this morning, you heard me preach on Matthew's resurrection story. Here, Jesus' appearance to the disciples is short and to the point. He meets them in Galilee and gives them a brief but extremely important instruction: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them all that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20) That's it, that's all he says. But what has he commanded? "Love God; and love your neighbor as yourself."

Friends, Jesus called Mary by name; and she knew him by the sound of his voice. Today, the risen Christ is calling each of us by name. And today, Jesus' words at the end of Matthew's Gospel are words for us: Go to all nations, to all people, spreading the good news of God's amazing love. As Jesus breathed that love into the disciples two thousand years ago, Jesus is still breathing that love into each of us. As Jesus appeared to the disciples two thousand years ago in that locked room, the resurrected Christ is walking with each of us, every step we take, every day of our lives. That's the promise of Easter – The risen Christ is with us always.

And the call of Easter is that we not act out of our own selves, out of our personal ego, but that all that we do will be driven by the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of the risen Christ. May it be so, now and forever more.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,

Lead us and guide us that we may truly be Easter people.

Breathe on each of us.

Breathe your wonderful love into each of us.

Fill us with your Spirit that we may truly radiate your love

to all whom we meet,

every minute of every day of our lives.

Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
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