

*Overflowing Grace*

John 20:19-23

You know how sometimes people laugh when they're nervous? It's like laughter is the default in that awkward moment when it's not quite clear yet what *is* the appropriate emotion to display.

That's what this story from the Gospel of Luke we read this morning makes me think of. We are in what the Church calls "Easter season". We tell the stories of how Jesus kept appearing to his followers after his body disappeared from the tomb that first Easter morning. We tell them again because the stories are still strange to us. What did Jesus say, and what did regular people do, when Jesus showed up alive again? I wonder if maybe most of those stories don't have a moment or two of nervous, uncomfortable laughter as part of their soundtrack. Because the idea that death is not the end of life, that life might be something larger than this container of body and breath and physical heartbeat—was completely flummoxing. It ought to flummox us now.

Historians would tell us that this time, and the odd experience people kept reporting of seeing Jesus again—was critical for the founding of the movement we are still part of. These were the days when Christianity was a small fringe faction inside a tiny section of Rome's Jewish colony. It should have died with the execution of its founder. But it overflowed into a movement that within 300 years would change the world.

So what happened, in between that nervous laughter and the emergence of a strong and empowered leadership for that movement?

Try and put yourself in this scene that Luke describes for us, on that first Sunday evening. Twelve young guys who had given up everything on the bet that Jesus had something—ideas, connections, power—like no one else they'd ever known. Now, all they know for sure is that he's gone. It's over. He hadn't even written anything down yet. They thought they had time. They had hoped there would be profits, or at least a product they could replicate. But way too soon, he'd gotten out there into dangerous territory, taken unreasonable risks. And now he was gone. There was some strange, whispered story about his body being gone from the tomb, but they didn't know what that meant. So they did the only sensible thing to do when you don't know what to do next. They called a meeting.

They huddled together, secretly, because the people who wanted to kill Jesus were still out there. They locked all the doors, so no one else could get in. Also maybe so nobody could get out. Remember last time they had dinner, and their colleague Judas had suddenly disappeared from the room? Look what happened then. Better to stay close. For now, keep out anyone you aren't sure is with you. I wonder if they counted, to make sure that all—and only—the right people were there. You know how it is when you're scared. You reinforce the walls around you. You listen for the sound of multiple locks on the door to click shut: the handle, the dead-bolt, the chain.

So there they are, hunkered down in that room. Nothing dangerous can get in. Neither can they get out, but they don't particularly want to get out. They're afraid, full of doubts—about themselves, about this person they'd thought was invincible, about why they'd ever thought following him made sense. I'm guessing they felt angry, because anger is usually what we do when we're afraid.

Someone looks up, and there—standing right at the edge of their circle of chairs—is Jesus. Jesus! How did he get in, through that locked door?

“Peace be with you,” he says. Peace? Really? There's no peace here. Shouldn't Jesus be mad? Wouldn't you think someone who had just been through what was essentially government-sponsored torture would start with a little commentary on how bad things have gotten? Plans for revenge, or at least repairing the broken criminal justice system?

Or maybe he would ask the question those disciples were most afraid of, deep down: Why did you leave me there, alone, when I needed you?

I imagine it was pretty quiet in that room. “Peace” he says to them—again. Peace, the opposite of fear. Peace, that somehow melted that great big ball of denials and betrayals and cruelties that had risen up between them, like an immovable boulder. Peace.

And then he gives them an instruction, the one command he will give them in this—John's—version of the story. Jesus says, “Don't stay in this room. I'm sending you out of here. Go out, back into the world that I know seems like a really frightening place right now. And here's what I want you to do, here's what I'm authorizing you to do with my name: Forgive people. I'm putting the whole power of God inside of you to do this one thing: forgive.”

Why that? Why did Jesus think *forgiveness* was the most powerful tool he could put in the hands of the people he was sending out to finish his work? Why not healing, or bread-multiplying, or some great universal truth? Why forgiveness?

Do you remember the genocide in Rwanda? It happened 25 years ago exactly. The date is seared in my memory because it was 1994, the summer my husband Terry died. I remember thinking, through the fog of my own grief, that while I was completely broken by the death of this one person I loved and needed, there was a place on the other side of the world where people were losing every member of their family at once. It was unimaginable to me.

800,000 people were killed in that tiny country in just 100 days. And they were killed by their neighbors, people they had always lived beside peacefully until the Hutu people were stirred up against the Tutsis, convinced that the neighbors they met every day at the market were suddenly a threat to their way of life.

Almost a million victims. And when that brief civil war ended, there were a million people left, who were guilty of murder or rape or burning down the house of someone who still came home to *their* village. How could those killers and victims ever live next to each other again? How could any country recover from the memory of something so brutal?

Soon after the war ended, the leaders of Rwanda set up an alternative court system. “Gacaca courts” they called them: 12,000 small courts, all in local communities. Their purpose was not to punish people but to tell the truth about what had happened to their country, their communities. There were trials, and evidence, and witnesses—just like regular courts. But the point was for the people who had plundered their own neighborhoods to own what they had done, and to speak face-to-face with the people they had harmed. When this happened, the victims could begin to forgive. No doubt not always, but often enough so that they could live together again in peace.

This is Godefroid Mudaheranwa and Evasta Mukanyandwi.

This is what he told the reporter who interviewed him: “I burned her house. I went there to kill her and her children, but God protected them, and they escaped. When I was released from jail, if I saw her, I would run and hide. But I decided to ask her for forgiveness. To have good relationships with the person to whom you did evil deeds — I thank God.”

She said: “I used to hate him. But when he came to my house and knelt down before me and asked for forgiveness, I was moved by his sincerity. Now, if I cry for help, he comes to rescue me. When I face any issue, I call him.”

This is Dominique Ndahimana and Cansilde Munganyinka

He said: “The day I thought of asking pardon, I felt unburdened and relieved. I had lost my humanity because of the crime I committed, but now I am like any human being.”

She says: “After I was chased from my village and Dominique and others looted it, I became homeless and insane. Later, when he asked my pardon, I said: ‘I have nothing to feed my children. Are you going to help raise my children? Are you going to build a house for them?’

The next week, Dominique came with some survivors and former prisoners who perpetrated genocide. There were more than 50 of them, and they built my family a house. Ever since then, I have started to feel better. I was like a dry stick; now I feel peaceful in my heart, and I share this peace with my neighbors.”

Afterward, in Rwanda, Hutus and Tutsi people bless each other with the greeting “Amahoro”. It’s an acknowledgement of sorrow, their shared loss. They press their fists to the chest. *Amahoro*. It means, “I understand what we both have lost.”

Today Rwanda has mostly recovered from its civil war. Today Rwanda is one of the fastest growing economies in Africa. Its people are healthy. There’s less poverty than there used to be. The country is not perfect, but it is mostly at peace.

Maybe Jesus said “Forgive” to the disciples because forgiveness can change the world. Because forgiveness is the ultimate—the most powerful—form of grace. The Greek word for forgiveness means, literally, “to free” or “to let go”. When Jesus walked through that locked door and said “Peace,” he was saying to those fear and anger and shame-filled disciples, ‘Stop hiding. Come out. Be free.’ And then he told them, ‘This is what I am sending *you* out to do. Go free other people. That’s what your life is about now: to set people free.’

And so I ask you this morning:

Where in your life—your workplace, your family, this community, our church—do you see that forgiveness is needed? What would it look like for you to be a bearer of that forgiveness, to open a locked room where someone has gotten stuck?

And if you feel unqualified or not strong enough or not processed enough to offer that forgiveness, remember that grace is not yours to create. It's already out there, because God seems to be quite generous—indiscriminate, really—in who he offers it to. You don't have to manufacture forgiveness. You just have to pass on what has been given to you.