

**NCC Seminarian Ann Aaberg presented this sermon on Sunday, 3 April 2005 in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts. It is based on John 20:19–31.**

## Now What?

SO NOW WHAT? Within only the past three months we have heard angels on high, found no room at the inn, entertained three wise men, found the astonishing young Jesus back at the temple, witnessed miracles, heard parables, reclined at the table, prayed in the garden, saw unparalleled horror, felt incredible sorrow and last week shouted in jubilant celebration at the triumphant Miracle to end all Miracles.

So now what? Well, some of us are finding that pesky green cellophane Easter grass all over the house, some of us are picking teeny pieces of pink and purple foil wrappers out of the carpet, some of us are noticing the wilted petals of tulips or lilies beginning to brown and drop to the floor; still others are making their tenth ham sandwich this week and wondering if we'll have enough time to make soup with the leftover hambone. Maybe we're eating chocolate again after going without for six weeks, maybe the Lenten meditation booklet is over in the corner with the pile of magazines, maybe we've settled back into "ordinary time".

Without the busy preparations that come with Advent, without the intentionality of Lent, and with the jubilation of Easter now a week old, how do we now actively connect the teachings of Jesus with our daily lives? Now what do we do?

It may be that our scripture reading this morning gives us all the direction we need. We find the apostles after Jesus' death behind locked doors huddled in fear. I dare say that we can all relate in some way to that feeling – to use an old expression – of the wolf at the door: perhaps it's economic insecurity, maybe it's addiction, maybe it's an unraveling relationship, perhaps it's serious illness. There are those who have experienced unspeakable terror at war, at home, in the streets. We all fear for our lives and the lives of the people we love in some way.

I had a dream a few years ago, as it turns out a few months before I recognized my call to ministry. That dream will always stay with me because of the incredible terror I felt, but more so because of its resolution. I was with a group of people who were being hunted down. There was no rational reason for it – only that the aggressors were convinced that we needed to be captured and killed. They were in uniform, they carried weapons.

We hid in the basement of a building, crowding together and crouching down as far as we could to make ourselves invisible. The running footsteps approached along with the gruff angry voices. The fear I felt gripped my chest, my heart pounded, I was frozen in fear. I have never felt such fear in any of my dreams nor in any of my waking moments. The worst happened. We were discovered and at gun point forced to march to the place where we would be tortured and killed.

[You'd think that I would wake up at this point or Tom Cruise would come and save us on a pink elephant or something – but no chance.]

My nightmare continued. We were led to a dark dungeon where one by one we were taken away for certain torture and death. The perpetrator was a woman dressed in black who knew no mercy, whom I recognized as Evil itself. All of the people I had been with had been taken away and destroyed. I had heard their screams followed by silence.

I was summoned next.

My entire body trembled. I knew there was no way out. I was face to face with Evil and certain death. As I walked toward her a voice in my head, a voice that was not my own, whispered one word: FORGIVENESS.

A gradual understanding came over me as I continued to walk toward my death. As I came close to the woman, my crouched upper body relaxed and straightened and with a strange confidence and a faith in the word I had heard, I opened my arms wide to embrace her. I took a last step closer and closed my arms around her. She softened, melted into a puddle on the floor and disappeared. I had forgiven her and the evil had disappeared. I awoke knowing the incredible power of God's gift of forgiveness to free and to liberate. I awoke knowing that this dream was a significant turning point in my life.

[I need to remind you here that this was a dream and I'm offering my interpretation of it. If we were ever to really find ourselves in a dangerous situation like this one, I would not suggest that we offer an embrace to our perpetrator to make him or her disappear, but that we seek safety!]

Last year I was reminded of the dream when my husband Doug and I were visiting an art museum in Italy. One of the paintings I saw reminded me of the dream. As Doug walked ahead of me, I caught up to him and said, "Remember that dream I had when I opened my arms and embraced Evil?" As I said the words and opened my arms I came face to face with a very large painting of the Crucifixion. My heart stopped and tears sprang to my eyes as I came face to face with Jesus in the same position. Arms outstretched, ready to embrace the world.

Physically, by crucifixion, Jesus was stopped in mid-embrace. But through his Resurrection he completed his embrace of the world. And in this morning's reading, he appears to the disciples and says to them: As the Father has sent me, so I send you....If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.

Here we are again in the wake of Easter. Through the Resurrection we know we have been embraced eternally, but here physically on earth we continue to get in the way of that embrace, that offer of eternal love – we stop it in mid-flow. And how do we turn it on again, how do we complete that embrace? Jesus told of many ways, but one important way he tells the disciples and us this morning is to allow God's gift of forgiveness to flow through us to others. Jesus is telling us: complete my embrace. Love others as I have loved you.

We have the power to heal the world through the embrace of forgiveness. That does not mean that we don't hold people accountable. That does not mean we stay in abusive relationships. But it does mean that we can attempt to find a healthy way to reconcile our broken relationships, to release our grudges.

We can attempt to rehabilitate without building more prisons, to retreat from exclusionary practices, to lay down the personal defenses in which we wrap ourselves to protect our pride, our reputation or our money. God's gift of forgiveness invites us to turn from individual blaming to examine the economic, political and social systems that contribute to poverty and desperate acts of violence. God's gift of forgiveness is the path to erasing misconceptions and extinguishing hate. God's gift of forgiveness is the path to peace.

A prayer attributed to the 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila answers the question of "now what?" and goes like this:

Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands but yours,  
No feet but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which  
Christ's compassion must look out on the world.  
Yours are the feet with which  
He is to go about doing good.  
Yours are the hands with which  
He is to bless us now.

Jesus says this morning, Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. May God grant us faith in the healing power of forgiveness. May God grant us the courage and the faith to dispel fear, to embrace healthy forgiveness, to complete Jesus's embrace of the world. As we move to the table this morning, we have plenty to do now that Easter is over. Let our journey continue.