

“Christ as Vaccine” (19April2020)  
John 20:19-31

Jesus shows up the week after Easter. He comes into a house where his followers are secluded. He offers peace.

That could practically be enough from today’s reading, to hear your parallels in experience and discover the good news for you, on this week after Easter, when you are secluded in your house. Right where you are, Jesus shows up to offer peace, to give you himself and his blessing and his resurrected life.

That could be enough. You may well need a word of peace in these days. You may be shut up in fear. You may be shut up because death is lurking outside. You may be agitated and uncertain, confined not just by the four walls but by news and trying to do—but not totally sure—what is best and is life-giving right now. You may be shut up not by your own preference, a little trapped or cooped up. You may be shut up, as unable to say much good. Or you may be actually fairly comfortable and be confident that you’re doing the right thing and the helpful thing, but still closed into your house anyway. You may not have locked doors and may even get to open a window, but it’s still a restricted life. So Jesus comes to find you there and bring you peace.

Again, that could be enough. If that’s what you need and is helpful today, I’m grateful, and just to be sure, I’ll reiterate it once more: the risen Jesus shows up on this week after Easter, coming behind the doors of the house where his followers are, comes into your home, in order to speak peace, to offer peace, to give the peace that—especially these days—the world cannot give. The peace of the risen Christ be with you.

Even though that could be enough, I was thinking of something else. Maybe it’s because I figured you’d be disappointed in a simple three paragraph-long mini mini sermon, that you’ve waited all week for this opportunity and that would leave you begging for more! Maybe it’s because I like to think about these things, the theology exploring where God and Jesus are in

the midst of our lives, especially in these current corona circumstances.

I’d like to explore, then, the notion of Christ as vaccine. Please don’t critique my epidemiological understanding too rigorously. This isn’t going to a peer-reviewed journal. And I’m sure not trying to co-opt science, but to help frame our religious understanding. Clearly it’s not an exact fit, and we’ll return to those distinctions. But I hope it can be helpful.

The first part is that Jesus has immunity. What would normally harm or kill him cannot anymore. He still bears the wounds, the holes in his hands and his side. It is clear that he really is the one who had suffered, but he has come through the suffering.

Now the first distinction that’s really really important is that Jesus wasn’t just sick. He didn’t recover. It’s not that he was suffering, then got better. He was dead. Done. Gone. The end. Just as Easter isn’t just things greening up in the spring, his resurrected presence isn’t a sort of emerging from hibernation that wasn’t really dead. Jesus isn’t healthy again, at least in our usual sense. It’s a new reality being shown to us and promised to us, which we are even now beginning to receive and live into. We should know that about resurrection and Easter.

For the sake of our metaphor, we can see that what had hurt Jesus can no longer hurt him. He has wounds—not scars, but wounds—but they aren’t bleeding or causing him pain or risking his wellbeing.

In the case of dealing with a virus, we might say Jesus developed antibodies against what had been attacking him. If we did a hypothetical blood test of Jesus, we’d discover trace evidence, then, of what had harmed him and discover that his body would be able to withstand it going forward.

Of course, in the case of Jesus, it wasn’t a virus that was killing him. Maybe we’d say it was the authorities or injustice. But still, the larger point would be not just a strain of a single virus, but that death itself could no longer harm Jesus. He was resistant to death.

The next thing, then, is that he offers that to others. When they have talked on the news about blood transfusions from people who've had the virus, it is the thought of adding some antibodies to help others resist the virus. Maybe in some way we think about the blood transfusion from Jesus as when he gives us his blood in communion.

But there's another notion within this reading about how Jesus gives us what we need to resist the disease of death: he breathes on us.

I was pointing out in Lent how surprisingly often this idea of God's breath kept coming around. God the Creator breathing the breath of life into the earthling sculpted from mud. The re-creating breath that came to enliven the dry bones Ezekiel saw. Today it is resuscitation, rejuvenating, bringing not just back from the brink of death, but out of death to life.

I'm struck because this is so potent these days, and that tells us to take it seriously. Jesus stands so directly against the harm and disease. In days when we continue striving for ventilators to help breath, and when we make and share and wear masks because of the risk of our own breath, when breath can cause death, it is so entirely powerful that Jesus comes in exactly to breathe on us, to give us the breath of life.

Jesus is a reversal of communicable disease. He is communicable wholeness, a contagion of wellness. When he touches lepers, it is not that he receives the disease but that they catch his cleanness. His breath isn't the danger of death, but the gift of life. So he breathes on you and gives you the Spirit of life.

Then he sends his followers out from behind their locked doors, into the world.

Now, before you'd presume I'm saying Jesus sends you out from your house as if you're inoculated against any harm and nothing bad can happen to you, as if God is protecting you in that way, that's not what this is about.

If Jesus is a vaccine, we could take in that image that a vaccine puts into you a weakened strain of the virus. It gives a dose of exactly what the problem is. By giving you life, Jesus also gives you a dose of death, in order to resist it.

When Jesus sent those disciples, it wasn't that they were immune to harm. The same powers and authorities that killed Jesus would be out, ready to endanger and damage their wellbeing. Jesus was *exactly* not going to prevent that. He's not a prophylactic, rubber glove Jesus. But facing death wasn't the end of the story.

So even while Jesus these days could be not sending but telling you to stay put, because that is what is in service of life, and while that may also be a difficult dose of death and feel like a diminishment of life, still I'm certain that the central point is as vital as ever: death no longer has dominion. It didn't defeat Jesus. It doesn't hold you in its clutches. You aren't safe, but you have been freed from that fear with the breath of life that is beyond death. That gives you peace the world cannot give.

As you breathe carefully in these days, as you hold your breath for what is going to happen in days to come, this gift from Jesus gives you confidence. That isn't the same as making you reckless, to disregard the rules and precautions. It's not to go and spread death simply because there is something more.

But most certainly there is something more. It is not just for this life, clinging to it tenaciously, thinking we can lock out all the harm and sorrow of the world, or that doing our best now is all there is. Even as you confront the bad news of death, I hope this good news enables you already to breathe a little easier, to breathe the breath of new life.

I suggest we take a moment now for those good breaths, ten of them, deep and lung-filling, to inhale and be inspired by the promise of Jesus and to let that fill us with life for now and in the future, as his peace finds you right where you are.