

**THE REAL PRESENCE**  
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April 23, 2017  
Second Sunday of Easter  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**John 20:19-31**

*It was evening on the first day of the week. The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of those out to get them. Suddenly Jesus stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."*

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Last Sunday on Easter morning I held the broken body of Christ in a basket while nearly 300 people passed by—fifty at the early service, 250 at the later. It was a moving experience in more ways than one.

As it turns out, I knew nearly everyone by name. It's true: I know your names but more than that I know the sorrows and hardships that many of you endure.

It has been my honor to serve this congregation for 42 years. In that time I have come to know many of you on a fairly deep and personal level. It's been a sacred privilege to be with you in some of the darkest moments of your life.

Some of the darkest moments have come in the wake of suicide. I've been with families in such situations nearly a dozen times—two just this past week. There's not much to say or do other than be present in the darkness longing for light to shine in our hearts.

And then there's the other deaths, some expected, some not. The hardest of those are of children killed in an accident. I've been in quite a few of those situations. There's not much to say or do other than be present in the darkness longing for light.

And then there are the other kinds of death when people have lost hope and feel as good as dead. It could be the loss of a job, or the loss of a marriage, or the loss of an adult child to drug addiction, or the loss of meaning, or the loss of joy—unbearable sadness, nothing to live for anymore. There's not much to say or do other than be present in the darkness longing for light.

Then there are gay boys and girls terrified to come out to their parents. And then there are adult children estranged from parents for other reasons and siblings estranged from siblings, often over sexual or other abuse from years gone by. The wounds are deep and don't heal easily if at all. There's not much to say or do other than be present in the darkness longing for light.

A pastor knows much that can't be told. We hold the suffering of others in a sacred space and pray for relief, comfort, strength, joy, forgiveness, healing and wholeness.

So when I hold the basket of bread and see you take a broken piece, I feel blessed just to know you. I know how hard your life is and yet here you are reaching out for a sip of grace, longing for a little light to shine in your heart.

For several centuries Christians fiercely debated the presence of Christ in the bread and wine. Some said, once the magical words are spoken the bread and wine "transmute" into the physical flesh and blood of Jesus. That's called transubstantiation.

Others said, that's baloney. The bread and wine remain unchanged but the flesh and blood of Jesus are "conjoined" with the bread and wine. That's called consubstantiation.

In the midst of those 16<sup>th</sup> century raging debates, our boy, John Calvin, a French Catholic dissident, shook his head and said: *get over it. Stop quibbling. It's a mystery.* All we know is that Christ is really present, not only in the bread and wine, but in the gathered community as well. That's called "The Real Presence."

Yes, there is healing power in the broken bread and the blood of the crushed grape. But there is also power in the gathered community of broken and crushed souls. We stand and walk together even when there's nothing we can do or say to make the suffering disappear.

And that's where the real presence of the Risen One comes in.

I know how tempting it is to lock up our hearts, afraid to be vulnerable. And yet in those moments of communion with each other, the Beloved One often steps through our locked hearts with a healing word: *Peace be with you.*

This is the first day of the week. We call it Sunday but for a long time it was known only as the first day.

The first day quickly became the most holy of days for on that day, according to Christian tradition, God raised Jesus from the dead. Some called the first day "the Eighth day of Creation" because the Resurrection was seen as the beginning of a new creation. On that mystical day Christians came to expect the Risen One to be present.

So, I'd like you to know and believe that whether the bread and wine is *literally* present on this Table, *each and every Sunday is communion. Every Sunday is Eucharistic.*

We are bread and wine for each other. Our presence together is like bread and all it represents to make us strong for the journey. Our presence together is like wine and all it represents to make our hearts glad.

On the first day of the week we gather in our Meeting House expectant and ready to taste and see the real presence of Christ in each other.

You can hear it in the gospel lesson for today.

*It was evening on the first day of the week. The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear that somebody was out to get them. Suddenly Jesus stood among them. "Peace be with you." Then he showed them his wounded hands and his pierced side.*

*Then Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; but if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

Jesus could have held a grudge or worse against those who denied, forsook and betrayed him. Instead he held out his hands.

He could have urged revenge upon those who crucified him. Instead he urged forgiveness.

The Beloved understands that as long as we refuse to forgive, as long as we hold and nurse grudges, as long as we seek an eye for an eye, as long as we meet violence with violence, the world will remain broken. And so the Beloved commissioned those gathered behind locked doors to get out of themselves and go into the world offering the real presence of love and peace.

Yes, we gather on the first day of the week as the church has done from the beginning. But we don't linger long. For the real presence of Christ sends us back into our own worlds to be a real flesh and blood presence of love and light for others.

Most of the time there's not much to say or do other than be present in the darkness longing for light to shine in our hearts and through us into the world. We breathe in the breath of the Beloved and say:

Peace be with you. (And also with you.)

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**Hymn 314**

"Longing for Light, We Wait in Darkness"