

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, April 12, 2026

Friends, as has become our practice of late, I invite you to join me in a time as we settle ourselves, and as David and my seminary professor reminds us, that we take a moment to breathe in God's mercies for ourselves and breathe out God's mercies to others. Deep breaths to breathe in the mercies of God for us and to breathe out the mercies of God for the world.

Let us pray. Gracious and merciful God, we come to you today gathered together to hear your words of comfort and challenge spoken across the centuries. Let your spirit move among us that our eyes might be opened, that our hearts might be warmed, that we may hear and know your will for us. And that this day that the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, you who are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, friends, here we are. Easter is over and things have settled down a little. You may not know but this is common. This Sunday is commonly called Low Sunday in church structures after the, well, the drop in the busyness of everything that happened during Holy Week and Easter, after our big celebrations. This Sunday is also jokingly called Associate Pastor Sunday as associate pastors across the United States step into the pulpit. And yet, like many things in our church calendar, Easter was not a day that is now over. Easter is a season for us. Seven weeks in all, seven Sundays, as we mark the 50 days between Christ's resurrection and his ascension into heaven. And in these coming six weeks, this Eastertide, we at Idlewild will be focusing on the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus in a sermon series we've entitled Resurrected Life. As we celebrate the ongoing joy of Easter, we reflect on how Christ's life continues to shape our own. So this morning, our text comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 20, starting with verse 19 and continuing through verse 23. And an important note before I begin. If you read the Gospel of John on your own time or, in fact, some of the other gospels as well, you will notice that throughout the Gospel there are phrases of derision and distrust toward what the writer of the Gospel of John calls the Judaikon, which is translated into English as the Jews. I, in my readings and my translations, always change that to the Jewish authorities, because scholars tell us clearly that the writers of the Gospel of John were writing to Jewish communities. When they wrote the phrase the Jews, they did not mean their neighbors or their sisters or their brothers or the people they met in the marketplace. They were speaking explicitly about the Jewish religious authorities, the Jewish religious authorities who clashed with Jesus throughout his ministry, both in the Gospel of John and in the four synoptic gospels. I bring this point up almost every time I read the Gospel of John because these texts, this text and other ones like it in the Gospel of John have been used for centuries to justify hatred, distrust, and abuse of our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world. They have been the basis of pogroms and even things as horrible as the Holocaust. So I want us to be clear when we read today. The Gospel of John is not talking about

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our faithful Jewish brothers and sisters, but rather the people with power and authority, the religious rulers of the time. Hear these words from the Gospel of John.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hand and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

You may have noticed that our text this morning drops us immediately after where our text on Easter Sunday ended. Here we find the disciples gathered immediately after hearing Mary's confessional statement. "I have seen the risen Lord," her running back to them, her witness to the improbable and the new that was happening around them. And yet the disciples are gathered behind closed doors. The more time I spent with this text this week, the more I realized that it does a very deliberate framing, a framing of looking backward and looking forward. As the text looks backwards, we see echoes of things that have already happened in the Gospel of John. The first thing Jesus says to his disciples is, "Peace be with you." This statement hearkens back to the promise of peace that Jesus made while speaking to them after the Last Supper only a few nights ago in their own timeline. A peace that's not like the world gives. Jesus himself says, "Peace I leave you. My peace I give to you." We see the gospel writer making pains to point out the very real and physical presence of Jesus, tying this appearance in that room, this resurrected appearance to the man that they once knew, pointing out the wounds in his hands and in his side. Because as we talked about last week, resurrection looks different.

When Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit, it takes us back to the prologue of the Gospel of John, which we spent some time talking about in January or February when we were talking about the image of the cosmic Christ that is framed there, Christ that was there before creation that was involved in all things coming into being. And just like God breathed on the waters of creation in Genesis, just like God breathed life into humankind, Jesus Christ breathes the spirit, new life and new creation over these disciples gathered in that room. He shows up there and he shares this word of peace and he breathed the spirit; and that is the crux, the turning point of the story because the gift of the Holy Spirit changed them in that moment and led them to life in community and life in the world.

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It is there that the text begins looking forward. We see Jesus send the disciples. A very deliberate imagery and language. Jesus Christ is commissioning them. “As the father has sent me, so I send you.” He sends them out focused on his work of forgiveness and reunification. It is here that we see these gathered faithful go from being disciples to being apostles. A disciple is a student or a follower and they were that. But here as the spirit joins them and they are sent into the world, they become apostles, messengers of God's future, the presence of God with the communities that they go out to seek. I like this passage from the resurrection stories because I think it teaches us a truth and lets us sit in a hard truth for us as Christians, that it's not really easy to live into the reality of Easter. Now, true, we seem to do it just fine, friends. We jump from the high of Easter morning to the high of this Sunday, and we don't think much about what the lived experiences of the disciples must have been like because even though the tomb is empty, they are gathered in fear and trembling. The world around them has not changed to match the enormity of what they are coming to realize is true. And I think that as believers two centuries later, we often time skip over the hardness of that even though the world around us has not changed. And at times it makes it difficult for us to hear and embrace the good news. I heard a wise person say last week that we friends can look resurrection in the face and still call it loss.

It's hard for us to live into the reality of resurrection. And yet here we are, friends. Our doors are not locked or barred, but we are gathered here in this room. And just like the disciples, we know we are called to bear the forgiving, transforming love of God into every sphere of human experience. And how do we do that? With the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the first in our Resurrected Life series because it is what makes it possible for us to live resurrected lives. In just a few moments or however long it takes me to finish preaching, when we stand for the affirmation of faith, we are going to proclaim and reclaim that the Holy Spirit claims us and nourishes us and engages us and calls us, that the spirit teaches us to pray, to witness, to unmask, to hear, and to work. Friends, the spirit is what gives us the strength to walk the path that God has called us to. To open our eyes to see God at work in the world, to be community, not just in this room, but most importantly to live community outside of these walls, to be apostles sent into the world to be the presence of God, siblings, to share the good news of the gospel in word or in deed.

But when I stand here today, I also know the reality, as I said moments ago, of the temptation that bids us to stay behind our closed doors, just like the disciples. I don't know what it is that keeps us locked in those rooms, but I know that we have each had an experience of being anxious, maybe being afraid of where we feel God's spirit calling us. Maybe it's our fear of failure or of ridicule or of loss. And so sometimes, friends, like those disciples and like children

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who are scared of the dark, we pull the covers over our head, and we tell ourselves if we can't see it, it can't see us. Maybe like the disciples, we are trepidacious about the world outside these walls and frankly, fair. There seems to be an unending cacophony of unrest and injustice and hatred and depravity. And at times it feels like it's drowning us. And yet that has always and ever been the way of the world. But we gather this Eastertide to remember the mystery and power of God and that the ways of the world did not win.

Friends, we are not being fair to the disciples if we think for one minute that after Jesus appeared to them in that room, they stopped being scared. In fact, I'm willing to bet that they were even more afraid in those moments and in the moments that would follow. Yet, they opened the doors, and they proclaimed the resurrection despite those things. The gift of the spirit gave them the courage and the strength to do so. Because standing before them, standing before us, friends, is the risen Christ, the one who is literally marked by the wounds of a broken world. And yet he stands with us, triumphant in resurrection, not bowed or cowed by the weight of such a painful world. And in that presence, we are strengthened to continue to share new life, a new way, a new world. Through the spirit, we can see clearly the lived reality of the world around us and the promise and hope of God's kingdom. The gift of the spirit is at work in and among us, and it makes resurrected life possible. The spirit ties us to the past, who we've known God to be, and to the future promises, equipping us to work for God's future—a future filled with resurrected life for all of creation.

Friends, we are an Easter people. We're a resurrection people. That means that when the lilies have wilted and the eggs are rotten and the chocolate has melted and the beautiful spring greenery and vibrant colors have been traded for muted browns and grays, we are still called to live with the joy and amazement of an Easter morning. And so when we are scared, fearful or lost, not if, but when, we turn again to the creator of all and trust in the work of the spirit. And when we witness the brokenness of the world, we step into that gap through the spirit. We pray. We witness. We unmask idolatries. We hear voices that have been silenced. We work for peace and justice and mercy. We live the promises of God. The gift of the Holy Spirit marks every single day of our resurrected life. friends, even the ones that are the hardest, even the ones that are the darkest. So may the spirit continue to move in and among us to carry us out into the world this day and every day. Amen.