

June 4, Day of Pentecost

## **John 20:19-23**

by [Anne H. K. Apple](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue

When it was evening on that day, the disciples locked themselves away. The pain of Jesus' leaving, and maybe the fear of what they'd risked by loving him, had reached a threshold. They didn't know how to leave the isolation of that locked room.

Hemingway says that "the world breaks everyone and then some become strong at the broken places."

We have a congregant who shapes strong ministries. She stays up late planning for our sister church in Cuba and wakes up early to bake bread to share with strangers. Once, when I detected the resonance of grief from her and inquired, she shared the story of visiting her father as he lay dying.

She described the process she invented to find a way to survive his leaving. Day after day, in the same hospital parking space, she sat in her car with her hands on the steering wheel. Each time she inhaled she said "God's peace"; each time she exhaled, "God's presence." She said she waited there until "something in me changed." She was receiving the presence of the Holy Spirit to guard her breaking heart and to guide her practice of faith.

Henri Nouwen said that we have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking. The context was a discussion about how the pain of leaving can tear us apart, and Nouwen was right about that—whether that leaving is a loved one's slow death or more sudden departure. Maybe it was the polarity of the political season and the continuing epic of violence unleashed in the world, but one day the pace of everything made it hard for me to breathe. I'd forgotten that refrain of "God's peace, God's presence." When I got to work, I hesitated and then walked into the sanctuary.

Amid my fear that life was spinning out of control, I was attempting to raise a modern shrine to meaning. I paused at the font and observed the light shining from the window. I walked the perimeter of the table and ran my finger across the wooden carving of the words, "Do this in remembrance of me."

I needed to sense and remember the deep promises of God. At the font, we remember that we are God's beloved children, called into community. At the table we are fed so that we may be sent to serve. The simple elements of water, bread, and fruit of the vine strengthen us to reject the allergy of the status quo. They draw us toward the places of pain and fuel us to serve with God's compassion. They embolden us to resist the powers of evil at work in the world. They remind us to risk love in the name of Christ.

As I left the sanctuary, I walked past the table and smiled, remembering an incident in worship. At the table, my colleague and I reached to move the elements closer. My colleague took the bread; I took the pitcher—which felt too light. I peeked into the pitcher while we sang the doxology. Sure enough, it was empty.

With an alleluia on my lips, I recognized that the cup of joy was empty. I was left thinking, what does it mean that there is an empty cup of joy?

Later that day, during a meeting with another colleague, we heard a child crying. We paused, listened, and continued with our work. Our church has a preschool, so a crying child is not out of the ordinary. But the loud sound got louder, so we moved in the direction of the crying.

She had risked all she had, and it seemed her cup of joy was empty.

We found a grandmother and her five-year-old grandson. With her keys in one hand and her wallet in the other, she was trying to pull him toward the parking lot. He was resisting her with all his energy. She was at her wit's end. He was visibly angry; she was frustrated.

We asked if we could help—and the woman's story poured out. She was his teacher as well as his grandmother, and he was having trouble in her classroom. He had been seen by a doctor, but she had to wait for paperwork to get him the medicine he needed. He was being disruptive in the classroom, so she had to leave work to take him home. She would be missing a paycheck, and he would be missing instruction.

She said, "I do not know how much longer I can do this." She had risked all she had in love, and in that moment it seemed as if her cup of joy was empty.

As I listened to the grandmother, my colleague moved closer to the boy and listened, too. She found that he was sad as well as mad. She shared that we cared

that he was sad and mad and that even when he was sad and mad, that God loved him, and so did we.

A little broken by the world but receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, we prayed in that space. My musing on the empty cup became clear: the cup of joy is never truly empty. In Christ's name, we'd moved toward the cry and shared God's love. God was at work, God's peace and God's presence. I'm learning to trust the Pentecostal thrust of that message.

Christ's message of peace is a call to courage and endurance—because we are human, and life will not be without chaos, suffering, and pain. It is a summons to listen to the cries of injustice and to testify to God's grace at work every day. It is an invitation into a life of loving-kindness.