

# Held Fast in Peace

[Barbara E. Reid](#) | *America* APRIL 5, 2010



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“Anyone you hold fast is held fast” (Jn 19:23)

**In 1989 Sister Thea Bowman** was invited to speak to the U.S. bishops about the needs of the black Catholic community. At the end of her address, she asked the bishops to sing with her and to link arms, as in the days of civil rights marches. Weakened from the cancer that would take her life the following year, she nonetheless led the bishops with her powerful voice as they joined her in singing “We Shall Overcome.”

She invited them to stand up and reach out and take each other’s hands, which they did. “No, not like that,” she admonished, as they tentatively took one another’s hands. “Cross your arms over your chest and then take the hands on either side,” she instructed. “That’s how we did it in the civil rights marches. You have to move in together, close to one another, and hold on tight so that no one is lost in the struggle.”

The instruction to hold on tight to one another is part of Jesus’ recurring message in the Gospel of John. After feeding the multitude he says that God’s will is that he should lose “nothing of all that has been given me” (6:39). Speaking as a shepherd, he declares that no one will snatch his sheep out of his hand (10:28). In his final prayer he says he guarded all those that the Father had given him and not one of them was lost (17:12; see also 18:9). In today’s Gospel, when the risen Christ appears to the fearful disciples, he empowers them to continue his mission of drawing all to himself (12:32) and not allowing any to be lost in the struggle.

Jesus equips the disciples with everything they need to continue his mission. First, he opens the locked doors of their hearts to recognize that he is standing in their midst. He had assured them that he would not leave them orphaned (14:18) and that he would abide always with them (15:4-10). He had also told them he would give them a peace unlike the peace that the world gives (14:27).

As the risen Christ stands in their midst, we see that his peace comes from letting go of fear and the desire for vengeance and from surrounding the violence with forgiveness and reconciliation. This kind of peace does not ignore the brutal suffering inflicted on the victim. Jesus holds out his wounded hands and side as evidence that is never erased. The pain from the violence can be transformed, however, into joy and peace through the

power of the Spirit and through the abiding presence of Christ, who makes possible forgiveness.

The disciples are not to stay huddled together in fear behind locked doors but are sent by Christ to continue his mission of healing and forgiving. Just as the Creator breathed life into the nostrils of the first human creature making it into a living being (Gn 2:7), so Jesus breathes life into the disciples, empowering them to forgive everything and everyone they can. The second half of verse 23, usually translated “whose sins you retain are retained,” does not have the word *sins* in the Greek text. A better way to understand it is “anyone you hold fast is held fast.” The sense is that through processes of forgiveness and reconciliation, disciples of Jesus continue his mission of holding on to all, arms folded across our chests, clenching each hand tightly, so that none, especially the most vulnerable, are lost in the struggle.

Not all follow the same process toward embracing the peace Christ extends. As the scene with Thomas affirms, disciples encounter the risen Christ at different times and in different ways. Some come to believe through seeing and through signs, others without these visible means. Both ways are blessed and lead to life in his name.

### **Praying with Scripture**

- Ask the Risen One to breathe new life into whatever area needs his empowering Spirit.
- Pray for the gift of forgiveness that can unleash peace and joy.
- How do you experience the abiding presence of the risen Christ?

**Read ["The Word"](#) column on the same readings from three years earlier.**

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