

## THE PROOF OF PEACE

John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter (Series B)

April 8, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Second Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 20, verses 19 through 31. It is on page 768 of the pew Bible.

Last week we didn't actually find Jesus in the gospel lesson, because he wasn't where we expected him—that is, the tomb; it was empty. But this week we skip ahead a few hours to the evening of his resurrection, and we find him getting into a place where we don't expect—a locked room.

Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 20, beginning at verse 19, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, **“Peace be with you.”** <sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”** <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, **“Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”**

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

<sup>26</sup> Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you.”** <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, **“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”** <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

**He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

The job of a preacher consists of one primary task. And I would describe it this way. Others might describe it a little bit differently, but hopefully not too much. But in my own words, the job consists of one primary task: to convince you that your sins are forgiven.

There are, of course, other things preachers do. One should teach the entire counsel of God's Word, including both the Law and the Gospel. We should learn the history of the Bible. We should also learn what good works God desires us to do for our neighbors. But the primary task is this: to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name (Luke 24:47), because this is the commission the risen Jesus gives to his disciples over and over and over again. So I think of my task as consisting primarily of this: to convince you that your sins are forgiven.

Even if you are already a Christian and you have been convinced this is true, we still have doubts. This is common for Christians. When we walk in, sit down, and meditate on the various sins we committed in the past week, it's not uncommon to think to ourselves that the forgiveness proclaimed here is for everyone else, but not "me," because we know our own sins. We know our own hearts like no one else can. We know the ways we have abused God's grace and lived in total ungratefulness. Perhaps we felt contrition over our sins at some other moment in life, and perhaps we were really resolved to do better. But things didn't go the way we intended. We didn't behave as well as we intended, and we don't feel as repentant as we once did. So we don't feel like we deserve God's continuing grace. We can look at our behavior and identify some specific sin and say, *A true Christian wouldn't do that*. So we doubt that God's grace is still for us, and we doubt God's forgiveness.

Other times we might doubt the *reality* of the Christian story. We doubt the historicity of it all. We wonder if, perhaps, we have believed in vain.

I hesitate to say these doubts are normal, because "normal" implies that a thing is okay, and doubt and unbelief are certainly not okay. But I can say these doubts are common. Most, if not all, Christians have these doubts from time to time—perhaps even often.

So the job of a preacher continues to be this: to convince you that your sins are forgiven by the risen Jesus. And this gospel lesson from John 20 might be the best text in the entire Bible for doing this, because, in this text, Jesus proves to his disciples that he really has risen from the dead, their sins are forgiven, and they have peace with God. And then he commands them to go and proclaim this forgiveness to others, including you.

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So the first part of this text occurred on Easter Sunday—that is, the day of Jesus' resurrection. Earlier in the day Jesus had risen from the dead, and he made a few appearances to one or maybe a few disciples at a time (20:11-18; Matt. 28:8-10; Luke 24:13-32). But now, in the evening of that day, Jesus appears to a larger group of disciples. And John often uses the term "disciples," not to refer to the Twelve, but to many others as well. And when we compare this text with Luke 24 (33-49), we learn that there were, in fact, many other disciples there with the Twelve. And, really, only ten of the Twelve were actually there. Judas had betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide (Matt. 27:3-5), and Thomas, for whatever reason, was not with them that evening. And we don't know why. Thomas may have had a very good excuse. It could be that he was the only one brave enough to go out and find provisions for the rest. But, for whatever reason, he wasn't there.

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So apparently these disciples had locked themselves in some house because they were afraid of the Jews. Since the body of Jesus had gone missing, the disciples probably feared that the same people who killed Jesus would suspect them of stealing his body and might come looking for them. So they locked themselves inside.

And then, somehow, miraculously, though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you” (20:19). Now this is odd. Normal flesh and blood people can’t pass through walls or locked doors. So maybe Jesus is a ghost?

But, remember, this is Jesus we’re talking about. This is the same Jesus who walked on water before his death and resurrection. This is God in human flesh. Locked doors are no problem for him. Jesus was no mere spirit. He had—and still has—real flesh and blood. So he showed them his hands and side. This is a demonstration of real flesh and blood.

But we also recall the events of Good Friday and realize what they would have seen in his hands and side: holes. You remember where the nails went. You remember where the spear went.

And this is such an odd thing. Jesus’ resurrected body was perfectly healed and glorified. No longer can he become sick or be injured. Sticks and stones can’t break these bones. Even walls can’t impose their will on this body. This is the kind of body that does not and cannot suffer decay. This, by the way, is the same kind of body we will have in the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:20). His body is perfect. But he keeps the wounds of his crucifixion. There are still holes in his hands and side, and it is by these holes that he makes himself known to his disciples. And why not? These are his battle scars. Everything else is healed. His heart pumps blood again. His brain sends impulses again. His punctured lung breathes air again. But the holes remain. These wounds are his trophies to prove the victory he accomplished.

The wounds prove that Jesus has the authority to say, “Peace be with you.” And these words are the key to this whole text. Three times Jesus says, “Peace be with you”—twice on that evening of his resurrection (20:19, 21), and once again the next week when Thomas was there (20:26). And this was a typical Hebrew greeting. If you ever want to impress your Jewish friends, just say to them, “*shalom aleikhem*” (שָׁלוֹם עֲלֵיכֶם). But make sure you pronounce it right; otherwise it won’t be very impressive. It means, “Peace be with you.” I assume the disciples must have heard these words from Jesus before. But this time, especially, Jesus wants them to pay attention to these words and what they mean, so he repeats himself. And John wants to make sure we pay attention to them, so he repeats them too. I wonder how many times Jesus uttered these words during his earthly life, but they’re rarely written down. In fact, these three times here in John and once in Luke’s parallel passage are the only times these words are recorded as coming from Jesus’ mouth. That’s because this is much more than an ordinary “hello.”

Jesus appears to his disciples to declare peace. He comes to declare peace with God. And it is specifically because of these wounds. These wounds are the proof that Jesus bore all of their sins and carried them into death. Jesus has made “peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). With these wounds Jesus earned the right to declare peace with God. And he earned the right to declare this to anyone he wants, because he bore every last sin of all humanity in his body.

The problem is that we do not naturally have peace with God. We are by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:3) and enemies of God (Rom. 5:10). And we know this intuitively. That’s why we have doubts that our sins are really forgiven. That’s why, when bad stuff happens to us, we

wonder if God is punishing us for something. That's why, when our consciences really prick our spirits, we want to run from God. We know intuitively that peace with God is not natural to us. And the proper interpretation of our sin is that we do not have peace with God. In fact, we fall under his righteous condemnation. This is what our sin teaches us, and we know this deep in our souls.

But the word of peace always comes from outside of us. It's not something we find when we meditate in the solitude of our hearts. Our consciences convict us of sin, but they do not proclaim to us the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The peace of God always comes from outside of us, because it was purchased for us by someone outside of us. The atonement for our sins does not—even in the slightest degree—take place within ourselves. It was accomplished completely by Christ in his death. So the proclamation of this peace also comes from outside of us.

And this is what Jesus did when he appeared to his disciples that Resurrection evening. He proclaimed peace to them. Then he showed them the holes by which he made peace between God and man. And then he proclaims that peace again.

And even though Thomas did not believe this marvelous news when it was reported to him, Jesus did not withhold his peace from Thomas. Because, even the sin of Thomas' unbelief—Jesus bore that sin in his body. That sin, which would threaten to destroy peace with God, has also been died for by Jesus. Even your doubt—it has been died for by Jesus.

We are often tempted to believe that our doubts will create an unforgivable rift between us and God. And I want to be clear that doubts are not good; they are sins against the First and Third Commandments. But the thing with sins is that Jesus is in the business of forgiving them.

But we're often tempted to believe that our doubts will overcome us, and God will reject us on account of them. But I want you to consider the case of Thomas. Thomas has often been nicknamed "Doubting Thomas." And this passage is the basis for that nickname. But notice this: Thomas is not described as a doubter in this passage. It's actually much worse. It's not like Thomas wants to believe but just has trouble from time to time. Thomas is a rank unbeliever in this text. He goes so far as to issue an ultimatum and demand proof: "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (20:25). And when Jesus appears to Thomas, he doesn't call him out for his *doubt*; he calls him out for his *disbelief* (20:27). Thomas wasn't a doubter. Thomas flat-out refused to believe.

But how does Jesus respond to Thomas' disbelief? What are the first words out of Jesus' mouth? "**Peace be with you**" (20:26). Then he singles out Thomas and grants his demand. Thomas made his ultimatum in disbelief. But Jesus yields to Thomas' demand and says, "**Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.**" (20:27) Jesus comes, not to shame Thomas for his sinful disbelief, but to overcome it. Even his disbelief is died for by Jesus, and Jesus comes to proclaim peace to him. So Jesus shows him his hands and side, and there Thomas sees the holes by which Jesus has purchased and earned the right to say, "**Peace be with you.**"

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So in this text we see Jesus proving himself to his disciples. He proves to them that he has flesh and blood; he really has risen from the dead. And he has earned the right to declare peace to them.

But this text isn't just about peace for those disciples in that room. It's also about peace for you and me and everyone to whom the Gospel is preached. Because Jesus comes to his disciples both with the promise of peace and a commission. Notice this. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (20:23)

And I want you to notice what's happening here: Jesus gave his Church a lot of authority. Remember, it wasn't just the twelve apostles who received this authority, so it's not something that gets passed down through ordination or apostolic succession to a select few. Jesus gave this authority to his entire Church. Jesus gave his Church the authority to *forgive* and *retain* sins.

And I think we tend to feel a little bit timid about this. We're kind of afraid to say to another person, "I forgive you all your sins." I mean, we hopefully feel just fine about forgiving the sins they commit against us, but Jesus is talking about forgiving the sins they commit against God. Now that feels like something beyond our authority. That's where we think, *Only God can forgive sins*. So we feel a little presumptuous about declaring God's forgiveness. But we shouldn't, because Jesus has authorized us to do this very thing. It's written down in the Scriptures, plain as day. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

I have a friend I worked with at Bible Camp who would do this randomly. We would be eating supper and if there was a break in the conversation, he would say something like, "Sean, you're sins are forgiven." It was a little bit funny, but it was also true. And no one ever said to him, *What gives you the right to declare that?*

But if we feel a little presumptuous about the first part—forgiving sins. We probably feel just plain mean when we do the second part—withhold forgiveness from a person. But both parts—both the forgiving and the withholding—are to be done in love. We don't do either of them arbitrarily, but we do them in the right circumstances for the good of the person we are speaking to.

When we know a person is unrepentant, we don't declare the absolution to them. This is when we do the difficult work. When a person is willfully unrepentant—when their sin has been made plain to them and they simply don't care—we proclaim what we must, "that so long as they continue in their impenitence, God has not forgiven their sins."

You may have noticed those harsh words in the absolution this morning. We don't use that version all the time, but it's important to dust it off on occasion so that any who refuse to repent might be warned of the danger of their impenitence. If their refusal to repent places them under God's condemnation, the loving thing to do is warn them about it. And the goal is always repentance. We desire that they will feel contrition over their sin and believe the gracious absolution. This is always the goal.

Our risen Lord Jesus Christ has given his Church the authority to forgive and withhold sins on his behalf. He has done this because he wants your sins to be forgiven, and he wants you to know it. He wants you to be convinced of this, because he has already done everything necessary to purchase your forgiveness. The proof of this is the holes in his hands and side. So the promise is certain. In the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ—that is, not by my own authority, but by his—I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.