

# LIFE AND PEACE

John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter (Series A)

April 16, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 20, verses 19 through 31. 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!**

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We have doubts. Any Christian who claims to never doubt God is a liar. So what do we do with our doubts? Or, a better question would be, “What does God do with our doubts?” We’re going to consider how Jesus dealt with Thomas, who, perhaps unfairly, is most famous for his doubts about Jesus.

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But before we get to Thomas, we’ll take a quick walk through the entire text, because it is a most-remarkable account.

It's the day of Jesus' resurrection. When John says, "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week," he's referring to that first Easter Sunday. Very early that morning, Jesus rose from the dead. He appeared to a few people throughout the day. First he appeared to some of the women (Matt. 28:1-10; John 20:1-18). Later in the day, in the afternoon, he appeared to two disciples who were leaving Jerusalem and going to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). After meeting Jesus, they returned to Jerusalem to tell the others about it. These two disciples, and probably the women from that morning, and many other disciples were with the apostles when Jesus appeared to them that evening. When you pictured this in your mind, you might have just pictured ten men sitting in a locked room. That would be the twelve apostles, minus Judas, who had killed himself, and Thomas, who was absent for some reason. But there were many others there as well. The word "disciple" in the gospels does not only refer to the Twelve. It refers to all who followed Jesus. If the gospel writers wanted to distinguish that a group was only the twelve disciples, they would refer to them as the "apostles" or, as John does in this passage, "the Twelve." But John, especially, when he uses the term "disciples," refers to a group much larger than the Twelve.

The doors were locked because they were afraid of the Jews, that is, the leaders of the Jews, not the common people. It was the priests and scribes who lobbied Pilate to crucify Jesus, and now that the tomb was empty three days later, these disciples feared those same leaders would come looking for them. They would probably accuse them of stealing the body. They would likely arrest some of them, and perhaps even crucify them, like they had done to Jesus. So the disciples were afraid. I would be too.

Into the middle of this fear, Jesus came. And he said, "Peace be with you" (20:19). This was a typical Hebrew greeting, kind of like how we might say, "Hey, how ya' doin'?" Even if you really mean it, it seems like a generic greeting. So Jesus says it again in order to emphasize that it means something significant (20:21). But before he said it again, he showed them his hands and his side.

Now, see if you can figure this out: *What did they see in Jesus' hands and side?* The holes from his crucifixion. Nails were pounded through his hands to attach the Christ to the cross. And after Jesus was dead, the soldiers thrust a spear through the Son of God's side, just to make sure he was dead. This is what the disciples saw in Jesus' hands and side.

These holes proved two things: First, they prove that this is the real Jesus. He's no look alike. Of course, the disciples knew what Jesus looked like. So them being fooled by a look alike is very unlikely, but so is a dead guy coming back to life. There are many unlikely things that are still more likely than a resurrection. So Jesus shows them his wounds. This is not just some guy who happens to look like Jesus. Nor did Jesus use a look alike to be crucified instead of him. Jesus did his own stunts, so to speak. This is the real Jesus, and he really was crucified, and now he is alive. The holes prove it.

The other thing the holes prove is that Jesus has earned the right to say, "Peace be with you." These are the wounds by which Jesus made peace with God. So it's not just a generic greeting, as if Jesus hopes his disciples will have peace. It is a powerful declaration that he has made peace between God and man by suffering and dying in the place of all mankind for the sins of the whole world. He has swallowed up the wrath of God. Jesus earned the right to say, "Peace be with you," and have his words give what he says. It's no wish. His words give peace.

I find it highly significant that Jesus still has the holes in his hands and side. He was raised imperishable. His body was glorified. When he died, the same thing happened to him that happens to everyone else: his entire body quit working. If your heart didn't have a problem before, it does when you die. If your brain was fine before, it's not anymore. When you die,

everything breaks. So to be resurrected means that everything gets fixed. And to be glorified means that everything is fixed better than it was before. Death no longer has control over Jesus' body. He can't get sick anymore. He can't be injured anymore. Everything is perfect and will remain perfect forever. That's the kind of body we will have when we are resurrected and glorified. Anything that is wrong with your body now will be fixed in the resurrection. Diabetes won't be there. Old age won't be there. Arthritis won't be there. If you lost a finger to a table saw, that finger will be back. Everything will be fixed perfectly in the resurrection. But when Jesus was raised, he kept these wounds. And this is highly significant. Why would Jesus keep these holes? It's because these are his trophies. They're like his championship ring. The marks are a sign of what he did.

We might have marks on our bodies that remind us of something. Every scar tells a story. I have a few scars on my body. Most of them, I got by being stupid, so I'd rather forget them. But some scars tell good stories. If you delivered a child by C-section, you have a scar that reminds you of your child. If you fought in a war, you might have marks that tell the story of your service and bravery. If you're a farmer or a mechanic, you probably have scars that remind you of work you did. Some of these are good stories, even though there was obviously a painful part to them. And that is certainly the case with Jesus' marks. They tell the story of him saving the world from sin, death, and the power of the devil. So he keeps them. Everything else in his body was made right, but he kept these marks. And I don't really know if he still has them, but I hope he does, because I want to see them.

Jesus' resurrection does not undo his death. We talked about this a bit last week, but this is really important. The resurrection does not make it as if Jesus never died. We don't move on from his death to his resurrection. Rather, we go through his death to get to his resurrection. Without Jesus' death, there is no resurrection, neither for him, nor for us. Without his death, we would remain in death forever. We sang about this in Martin Luther's great Easter hymn,

“Holy Scripture plainly says

That death is swallowed up by death,

It's sting is lost forever” (“Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands;” 1 Cor. 15:53-57).

This is how Jesus gave peace to his disciples.

And he commissioned those disciples to bring this peace to the entire world. That's why he gives them the Holy Spirit. We sometimes think of Pentecost, seven weeks later, as the day Jesus' gave the Holy Spirit. But it's not. On Pentecost, he gave them a powerful manifestation of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), but he first gave the Holy Spirit to them on that evening of his resurrection. The Holy Spirit comforts them and prepares them to preach the Gospel. He gave them the Holy Spirit that evening because he had just made atonement for sins. The thing about the Holy Spirit is that he is God. And the presence of God is deadly for sinners. Jesus was safe to be around, because he veiled himself in humility. But when Jesus gives the Holy Spirit, he gives him to be with us and in us. This presence would be deadly if not for the atonement. So it is quite natural that, as soon as Jesus has made atonement for sins, he would breathe him out upon his disciples. And every Christian receives this same Holy Spirit through Baptism (Acts 2:38).

And, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives his disciples a mission. And with that mission, he gives authority: **“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld”** (20:23). This still shocks some people, but Jesus gave his Church authority to forgive sins. And he's not just talking about the sins people commit against us. He's talking about the sins we commit against God. This might shock us, because only God can forgive sins. But God has given his Church the right, and not just the right, but the

command to forgive sins on his behalf. Not only may we proclaim that your sins are forgiven, but we must. This is why, when we confess our sins together in worship, we never leave you hanging. The answer to confession is always absolution. If you refuse to confess your sins, or if you have your spiritual fingers crossed behind your back, then your sins are not forgiven. But God's great desire is to forgive, and the entire cost has been paid. So the answer to confession is always forgiveness. The Church can and must proclaim absolution. Your sins are forgiven. You have peace with God.

This is what those disciples saw, heard, and received that evening.

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But one disciple was notably absent: Thomas. We don't know why he wasn't there, so we won't pass judgment on that. But when the other disciples reported it to him, he did not believe them.

Now remember, this is not just the ten other apostles who saw Jesus. Their testimony should be enough for Thomas to believe, but there were many others too. But Thomas refused to believe unless Jesus proved it to him too. And we should notice that Thomas did not absolutely refuse to believe. But he refused to believe unless Jesus proved it to him too. Maybe a small part of it was jealousy, that the others got to see Jesus, but he didn't. The bigger part of it is that people don't just rise from the dead. Recently, Thomas had witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, so he should be more inclined to believe it, but still, people don't just come back from the dead. It's not normal, and everyone knew it.

We have some cultural arrogance today. We think that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we are very enlightened, and people in ancient times were rather dim. But that is arrogant and false, especially when it comes to matters of death and life. If any era is likely to get duped into believing that someone rose from the dead, when they really didn't, it's us. We have video games where, if you die, you just respawn somewhere and try again. Or how often do you see it on TV where some character is presumed dead, but they narrowly escaped, and now they're back. On TV, all you have to do is write it into the script and a person is alive again. We have all these false experiences that undermine the permanence of death. But the ancients had nothing of the sort. They knew, especially from intimate experience of handling the bodies of their loved ones, that death is very permanent. They were not easy converts, which makes it that much more validating that hundreds of people claimed to see the risen Jesus.

And, perhaps, we can understand why Thomas refused to believe unless he also saw the risen Jesus. To some degree, he's just being reasonable. Now, it would also be reasonable to believe the testimony of dozens of eyewitnesses, but he's the kind of person who requires evidence. And this is not a completely bad thing. This is a very good quality for scientists, journalists, jurors, and all sorts of people. But one kind of evidence is eyewitness testimony. And, while the testimony of one or two people might be unreliable, the testimony of dozens is not. So Thomas should have believed, but he didn't.

And we might not have believed either. We also have doubts. Any Christian who claims to never doubt is a liar. And we should notice that there is a difference between doubts and unbelief. Thomas, at this point, was an unbeliever. It's not like he believed, or wanted to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, but just questioned it. No, Thomas was a flat-out unbeliever. He refused to believe. That's a lot different from believing something but having doubts or questions. Doubts exist alongside faith. Unbelief does not.

And even within the category of doubt, there are different kinds of doubts. There are two basic categories of doubt: doubts about God and doubts about us. Sometimes we might doubt

God. We might think, *Did God really create the entire world? Or, Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Is he really the Son of God?* These are doubts about God, and we might experience them from time to time. But many of the doubts we have are not really doubts about God, but doubts about ourselves. If we think, *Does God really love me?* that's more a doubt about ourselves than it is about God. If we doubt that God could love us, it's because we are aware of our own sin and weakness. Or we might doubt our own faith. *Do I really believe? Do I have enough faith? Or, Am I really sincere when I confess my sin?* These are doubts, and they might feel like doubts about God, but they're not. They're doubts about ourselves, and we should doubt ourselves. If you don't think your faith is strong enough, you're right. If you think you're not sincere enough when you confess your sins, you're right. If you think you're not lovable, you're right. Let's be clear: these are not doubts about God; they are doubts about yourself, and we should doubt ourselves. We should doubt ourselves, because our faith is not in ourselves; it is in Jesus. And we should not have confidence in our own faith. We should trust in Jesus, because we are not really saved by our faith. That is, we're not saved by our own act of believing. We are saved by Jesus, and he is the same, regardless of how strong we think our faith is. If we trust in our faith, that's just faith in faith, which is really faith in ourselves, and it cannot save us, because it amounts to nothing. But true faith depends on Jesus. And that means that faith is effective to save, even when it feels weak, because the power is not in our faith, but in the one we depend on. And Jesus is faithful.

Jesus is not the type to punish weakness. He overcomes it. He saves in spite of weakness, sin, doubt, and unbelief. Consider the way he dealt with Thomas, who sinfully and unreasonably refused to believe. He came again and gave to Thomas what he had given to the other disciples a week earlier. "Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **'Peace be with you.'** 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'**" (20:26-27).

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We might crave such an experience. Instead of having to believe what we hear, as reasonable as that testimony is, I would very much like to see what Thomas saw. But this is not our experience, at least, not yet. But, **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"** (20:29). Blessed, because, even though we do not see what Thomas and the others saw, we have everything they received. We have the forgiveness of sins. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have the promise of eternal life. And, someday, we will see what they saw. For now, we live with doubts and weakness. We endure mockery for believing something we do not see. But we depend on Jesus, who loves us and, through the Holy Spirit, guards our hearts until the day we see the Savior we have depended on. Amen.

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And, until that day, "May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7). Amen.