

PEACE BE WITH YOU

John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter (Series B)

April 11, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Second Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 20, verses 19 through 31.

Last week, on The Resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus did not actually appear in the gospel reading (Mark 16:1-8), because he was not in the place where everyone expected him to be, that is, the tomb where he was laid. This week we continue the history from later that evening, and Jesus shows up in a place where he is not expected, that is, a locked room.

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

¹⁹ 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.”** ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”** ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, **“Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”**

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.

²⁵ 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.”

²⁶ 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.”**

²⁷ 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.”** ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ 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!

Jesus has made peace with God. The holes in his hands and side are the evidence of peace. And Jesus lives forever to declare peace to you.

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This passage begins on the evening of Jesus' resurrection. It is the first appearance of Jesus to the apostles. The women who went to the tomb on Easter morning had seen the risen Jesus (Matt. 28:8-10). In Emmaus, a village about seven miles from Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to two disciples from the larger group (Luke 24:13-35). But this is the first appearance to the apostles. It occurs on the evening of the first Easter Sunday.

Only ten of the apostles were there. Judas, of course, had betrayed Jesus and soon after hanged himself. And Thomas, we learn, was not with the other ten when Jesus first appeared to them. There were, however, several other disciples from the larger group who were present, including the two who saw Jesus in Emmaus; they had quickly returned to Jerusalem to tell the apostles they had seen the risen Lord. So ten of the apostles were in the room, along with several other disciples.

They were afraid of the Jews, that is the leaders of the Jews, the chief priests and Pharisees. Those men had orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus, and now that the body was missing from the tomb, the disciples feared that the leaders of the Jews would come looking for them. Most likely, the priests and Pharisees would accuse the disciples of stealing the body.

And before Jesus actually makes his appearance, the disciples don't know what to make of the reports of his resurrection. Earlier in the day, when the women who were at the tomb first reported Jesus' resurrection, the apostles considered it to be "an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:11). In the evening, the two disciples from Emmaus arrive and report that Jesus had appeared to them. And it was while they were discussing these things that Jesus comes into the room (Luke 24:35-36).

This must have been a frightening thing. Remember, just three nights earlier, these same apostles abandoned Jesus when he was arrested. One of them denied that he even knew Jesus. Now Jesus appears to them. Luke reports that the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost (Luke 24:37). What was this all about? Had the ghost of Jesus come back to get his revenge?

No; quite the opposite. This was no ghost. And there is no hint of revenge.

According to both John and Luke, the first word out of Jesus' mouth is, "Peace." He says, "Peace be with you" (20:19; Luke 24:36).

And then, to prove that he is real and that he comes to give them peace, he shows them his hands and his side. He shows them the holes, by which he has made peace.

And this, I think, is the remarkable thing for us to recognize: Jesus identifies himself by his wounds. The disciples had spent three years with Jesus. They knew what he looked like. Jesus could have picked any number of ways to prove that he had "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39). But he wants to show them his wounds. These wounds—the holes in his hands and side—are his trophies.

Jesus rose from the dead incorruptible. He got his blood back. Breath came into his lungs again. His brain resumed sending impulses. His once-dead-cells received those impulses and resumed doing "alive" things. His whole body was put back in working order. And the process of death, which reigns in our bodies, causing us to get sick and eventually die, no longer exists in Jesus' body. Everything is put back together better than the way it was before. His body is like Adam's before the fall into sin, before death began. It's perfect. It's the way God designed human bodies to be.

But Jesus, apparently, decides to keep the wounds. They're like his trophies, his battle scars. He wears them with pride, and rightly so. He gets to show them off to prove that he has borne the wrath of God and won our salvation. Jesus is, for all eternity now, the crucified one.

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Both in this appearance, and the one a week later when he appears to Thomas, he first declares peace, and then he immediately shows off his wounds.

And there's a connection here. The holes prove that he is real; he has flesh and bones. This is the same Jesus who is crucified. But beyond that, they prove that he has done what is necessary to make peace with God, perfect peace.

When he comes and declares peace to the disciples, he is declaring a peace that only exists because of these wounds. This is the proof that the perfect Lamb of God has borne the full wrath of God. He has earned the right to say, **"Peace be with you."**

"Peace be with you" (*"shalom aleikhem;"* שְׁלוֹמִים אֵלֵיכֶם), was a typical Hebrew greeting. The disciples would have been used to hearing it several times a day. I imagine, since this greeting was used so often, that it sometimes went unnoticed, kind of like how we say, "How ya' doin'?" when we greet someone. It's so common that we usually just answer, "Pretty good. How are you?" regardless of what the real answer is. I've even had people walk up and say to me, "How ya' doin'?" and then walk right past me before I even have a chance to say, "Pretty good." When a greeting becomes that familiar, we kind of just take it to mean, "Hi." So if you really want to know how a person is doing, you might have to ask a second time, "No, really, how are you doing?" And then they hear the question for what the words actually mean.

That's what's going on here when Jesus says, **"Peace be with you."** Jesus is not just saying, "Hi." John records it here for us to read and hear because it means something. It means more than just, "Hello." So right after Jesus shows them his wounds, he repeats it again, **"Peace be with you"** (20:21). And he repeats it again, a week later, when he appears to Thomas, **"Peace be with you"** (20:26).

The risen Jesus keeps saying, **"Peace be with you,"** because he has earned the right to say it. He has earned the right to say it and have it mean more than just a hopeful greeting. Because of his wounds—these holes in his hands and side—he has the right to declare peace. When Jesus says, **"Peace,"** his words actually create peace.

Just like in the beginning, when God said, "Light," and there was light (Gen. 1:3), so now he says, **"Peace,"** and there is peace. He is declaring that these cowardly sinners, who ran away on the night in which he was betrayed, have peace with God.

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 truly 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. 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. 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 was an unbeliever.

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 earned the right to say, "Peace be with you."

This is the will of God. By these wounds, Jesus earned peace with God. So it is now God's will for this peace to be proclaimed. That's what Jesus does to his disciples, he declares peace to them, and he commands them to declare this same peace. He 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).

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.

Sometimes we feel a little bit timid about this. We're kind of afraid to say to another person, "I forgive you all your sins." Hopefully we feel fine about forgiving the sins they commit against us, but Jesus is talking about forgiving the sins they commit against God. 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."

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The Church is the body of Christ on earth. Before his ascension into heaven, Jesus entrusted his work to his disciples, that is, the Church. That's why he breathed out his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit strengthens the Church for her work. So we continue the work Jesus did. This includes, in part, caring for physical needs. Jesus did this in his public ministry. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. The Church continues to do these things in Jesus' name. And to do something in Jesus' name, means that we do it on his behalf. It means that the action really comes from Jesus. That's what it means to do something in Jesus' name. So if we believe that the Church is the body of Christ on earth—I'll even be more specific—if we believe that this congregation is the body of Christ, then we must be caring for the physical needs we see around us. And I don't simply mean that you as individual Christians must do this. I mean that we as a congregation must do it, because an individual Christian is not the Church. An individual Christian is not the body of Christ on earth. An individual Christian is a member. The congregation is the body of Christ. So when a gift comes through the Church, it is more easily seen as a gift from Jesus himself. And that's what we want. When we care for a person's physical needs, when we care for the sick or feed the hungry, we want them to see it as a gift from Jesus. The Church continues the work of Jesus on earth.

Caring for physical needs was certainly part of Jesus' public ministry, but it was not the most important part. And we must understand this as well. Just as we must understand that our mission includes caring for physical needs, it is even more important to understand that that is not our primary work. Our primary work is the same as Jesus': proclaiming peace with God. The miracles of Jesus, in which he cast out demons, healed the sick, fed the hungry, those miracles revealed that Jesus had come to make peace with God, and this peace with God would mean eternal healing and eternal food. Jesus forgave sinners in his public ministry, and he valued that forgiveness higher than physical healing or filling them with bread (e.g., Mark 2:1-12; John 6:26). We must value it higher as well. The greatest gift we have for a dying world is the peace Jesus made by his blood of his cross (Col. 1:20).

So the Church does the work of Jesus on earth by forgiving sins. We proclaim forgiveness in Jesus' name. That is, it is not really us who forgive sins, but Jesus. We speak the words Jesus commanded. Jesus forgives sins.

We also, when necessary, withhold forgiveness. Jesus did the same thing with those who refused to confess their sins or believe in him. It's not what we want to do. It's not what God wants to do. But we do it, hoping that those who refuse to repent will awaken to see the condemnation their sins deserve, and believe in Jesus. Again, the purpose is peace with God.

So dear sinner, dear doubter, dear unbeliever, you who are afraid that God will judge you and condemn you for your sins, your sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. Jesus has made peace with God. The holes in his hands and side are the evidence of peace, and he lives forever to declare peace to you. You are forgiven for Christ's sake.

And you who love your sins, you who continually refuse to believe, repent. Believe in Jesus. Jesus has made peace with God. The holes in his hands and side are the evidence of peace, and he lives forever to declare peace to you. Christ's forgiveness is also for you. Amen.

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