

2nd Sunday of Easter
April 11, 2021
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
John 20:19-31

Peace Be With You

John 20:19–31 (NIV84)

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. 21 Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” 24 Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.” 26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though 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; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” 28 Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” 30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Good morning. Hello. Greetings. How are you?

There are all kinds of ways people greet each other when they meet. Each culture and region has its own style of greeting and particular phrasing. For Jews at the time of Christ and in some cultures still today, the standard greeting is “Shalom,” “Peace.” On the evening of the very first Easter, Jesus meets his disciples in the locked room with nothing more than the standard greeting for the day. “Peace be with you.” But this greeting is anything but standard and normal.

When we greet others, it is the polite thing to do. We might ask how they are by habit without actually wanting them to tell us how they really are. Our greetings become habits of proper etiquette instead of words that mean something substantial. But Christ broke his three day prison and rose to life that very morning. His words are more than a polite greeting. His words give what they promise – peace. The disciples need the peace of Jesus to go and proclaim the forgiveness of sins. They need the peace of Jesus to believe that he is their Lord and God. The peace of Jesus is also with us.

Peace to Believe Jesus is My Lord and My God

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

We find the disciples at the first Sunday worship service of the Christian church. However, it was not much of a celebration. I am sure last year's pandemic restricted Easter Sunday was more festive than the gathering in the locked room on the first Easter. The disciples are still dealing with Good Friday. By this time they have heard the report of the women who saw Jesus alive outside of the tomb that morning. They have the report of Peter and John who looked inside the empty tomb. Yet, there was no peace in that room among the disciples, only fear.

At times like this we tend to play the "what if" game. What if the soldiers were playing a cruel trick on the disciples and took Jesus' body from the tomb? What if the women only saw the gardener and in their grief imagined he was Jesus? What if the Jewish leaders are not satisfied with killing Jesus and they come after the disciples next? What if is a game that usually ends with the worst possible result. It creates fear and uncertainty.

Then Jesus enters the room. The doors were locked and Jesus entered the room. The "what ifs" are going away. Jesus is truly alive. The women told the truth. The empty tomb Peter and John looked into meant good news instead of bad. And then Jesus speaks, "Peace be with you." How much these words mean when spoken by the One with nail marks in his hands and the mark of a spear in his side. "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him." "By his wounds we are healed." The marks of his payment for sin is visible but the suffering is completed. For he has risen from the dead, just as he said. The peace of forgiveness is truly theirs and ours. And they rejoiced to see Jesus.

Of course Thomas had to wait a week. He would not believe any of them.

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though 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; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." 28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

On the second Sunday worship gathering of the Christian church, Jesus arrives in the same way and says the same thing, "Peace be with you!" And just as Jesus did for the other disciples, he shows Thomas the marks of his suffering that is now completed. Thomas believes and rejoices just like the others rejoiced in seeing Jesus alive again.

We don't know why Thomas was missing on Easter evening. But let's play a little "what if" game. What if Thomas had not gathered with the other believers on the second Sunday? What if Thomas decided that he did not need to be around the fearful disciples who were telling stories that Thomas did not believe? Then Thomas would have missed out on the peace Jesus gave when he appeared in that locked room. Thomas would not have rejoiced to say, "My Lord and my God!"

What happens when we gather together in Jesus' name today? Following the pattern of the early Christians we often gather on Sundays since Christ rose on a Sunday. When we gather in the name of Jesus, Jesus is here among us to proclaim the same message as he did to Thomas and the others, "Peace be with you." Christ delivers the peace of God's forgiveness to us in the absolution and in the Word of God. Jesus gives us the assurance of peace with God through the biblical words of the hymns and the sacrament of Holy Communion. He promises peace with God through the reminder of our baptism when the sign of the cross is made and through the benediction at the end of the service.

What happens if a believer misses the gathering of believers like Thomas missed the first one on

Easter Sunday? Thomas was not able to go to the online recording and watch the service on Monday like we can now. If someone today avoids worship (in person and online) because of doubts about some part of the Bible, those doubts will only grow and be confirmed by the unbelieving world around us. If someone avoids the regular gathering of believers around the Word of Christ because they are ashamed of some sin of the present or past, they are missing out on the peace of Christ. If someone avoids the gathering of believers because they have an issue with one of the other believers, they are missing out on the only peace that not only reconciles us to our God but also to each other.

Peace to Forgive Sins

Of course, Jesus does not physically appear to us every Sunday in our gathering for worship. Maybe we should try locking the doors and see if Jesus appears then. Or we can trust that Jesus is with us as we gather together and trust that he has given us as the Church, the authority to proclaim his peace through the forgiveness of sins. He gave this authority to the first Sunday gathering of believers on Easter evening.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

When a pastor announces God's forgiveness in the absolution, he is not just hoping that God forgives the people gathered for worship. The absolution has the authority and power of Christ's promise on Easter behind it. The absolution is not effective to forgive sins because of the pastor's life or faith. The absolution brings peace with God because Jesus promises "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven." The power and effectiveness of the absolution depends on the One who was crucified and then rose on the third day.

And this is the message the disciples were sent out to proclaim. We have the same mission. Proclaim the peace of Christ through the forgiveness of sins he won on the cross and showed by the empty tomb. We do this at our Sunday gatherings but Jesus did not limit the power of his forgiveness to Sundays or to gatherings of believers in a church building. You have the authority to proclaim the peace of God to individuals in your life. When a friend or family member is struggling with guilt, tell them, remind them about the peace Jesus won for them. When a neighbor or coworker thinks that God is angry with them or that God has abandoned them, tell them that Jesus has given them peace with God through his resurrection.

"Peace be with you" is much more than a normal, polite greeting when spoken by the risen Christ. May our greeting and interactions with others be more than polite exchanges but instead point each other to the peace of Christ.

Amen.