

April 11, 2021  
John 20:19-31

Easter 2  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Peace That Overcomes Fear”

“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

*Just because you are paranoid doesn't mean that they are not out to get you.*

There was nothing paranoid about the fear that kept the disciples behind closed doors on the Sunday after Jesus' death. John reports that on the evening of the day we know as Easter Sunday “*the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear ...*” (John 20:19). Their fear was well-founded; if it were possible for Jesus of Nazareth to be executed, it would only be a matter of time before the same forces that had killed him would come knocking at their doors. They would have stood out in Jerusalem as Galileans, people from the same region as Jesus and therefore assumed to be his followers. Jesus had warned them that “*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Mark 8:34) and that “*you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name*” (Luke 21:16-17); but that did not help lesson the fear that gripped them as they cowered behind those locked doors. Even the message Mary Magdalene brought to them that “*I have seen the Lord*” (John 20:18) did not assuage the fear that what had happened to Jesus would soon happen to them.

It is to this fear-filled group of “disciples” (*mathetai*, a group that represents the faith community in general, nor only the apostolic leadership) that “*Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'*” In one sense, this was a conventional greeting that was often used in greetings (“*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” – Romans 1:7); but here it has an additional function. With these words, Jesus fulfills a promise he made to his disciples in the Farewell Discourse of the Fourth Gospel in which he promises the gift of peace:

- “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” – 14:27.

The peace (*Eirene*) of which Jesus speaks is more than merely the absence of conflict or war; it is a peace that embraces the salvation of the whole person, which in Christ

is present as the power of God. It is *“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [that] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:7). The peace of Christ is *“the relationship in which God places believers by the reconciling work of Christ”* (Geoffrey Bromiley). This peace is given to a community who will experience the world’s hatred and persecution (*“Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you.”* – 15:19). The gift of Christ’s peace reminds the faith community *“that they need not be fearful or anxious of the opposition they will face, but can do so with the peace of Jesus.”* (Gail O’Day).

After Jesus’ appearance and greeting, *“he showed them his hands and his side”* (20:20), the places where he had been wounded at his Crucifixion (*“one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out”* – 19:34); this act underscores the continuity between the earthly and risen Jesus, that he was truly *“crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried”* (Apostles Creed). It is at this point that *“disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord”*; in the appearance of the Risen Lord, the words of the psalmist have been fulfilled as *“you turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent”* (Psalm 30:11-12). The disciples’ joy, like the end of Mary’s weeping when she comes into Jesus’ presence in the garden (20:16), is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that *“you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you”* (16:22). The disciples rejoice in the good news that *“weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning”* (Psalm 30:5).

Jesus responds to the disciples’ rejoicing by repeating his greeting, *“peace be with you,”* indicating that the disciples can receive Jesus’ words of peace only after they recognize that the person who speaks to them is “the Lord.” His repeating greeting is followed by a pronouncement of commission: *“As the Father has sent me, so I send you”* (20:21); these words are a direct echo of Jesus’ words in his High Priestly Prayer, that *“as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world”* (17:18). The Father’s sending of Jesus is an analogue for Jesus’ sending of the community (*“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”* – 3:17). Jesus commissions the faith community to continue the work God sent him to do. After this pronouncement, Jesus *“breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”* (20:22-23). The gift of the Holy Spirit is presented as that which empowers the community to continue Jesus’ work, the fulfillment of the promised gift

of the Spirit “*which believers in him were to receive, for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified*” (7:39).

John’s description of Jesus breathing on the disciples (*emphysao*) evokes the description of God’s breathing the breath of life into the first human at creation (“*then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being*” – Genesis 2:7). It also recalls the description of the breath of life in Ezekiel’s description of the “valley of dry bones”:

- “Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: ‘Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.” – Ezekiel 37:9-10.

Jesus has promised that those who believe in him will receive new life as children of God (“*What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit*” – 3:5), and the Holy Spirit is the breath that sustains this new life.

Jesus’ words of commissioning and his imparting of the Holy Spirit is bestowed on the entire faith community, and therefore forgiveness of sins is the work of the entire community: “*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*” (20:23). The forgiveness of sins must be understood as the Spirit-empowered mission of continuing Jesus’ work in the world; all are called and empowered to be bearers of this message of forgiveness and reconciliation that is ours in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- “According to John 20:21, Christ commissions the apostles as equals, without distinction ... He sends forth each one individually in the same way as he himself was sent, he says, and therefore he bestows upon no one any privilege or lordship over the rest.” – Martin Luther, *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 1537.

As God has “*reconciled us to himself through Christ,*” our Lord has also “*given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against them, and entrusting the ministry of reconciliation to us*” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). When the faith community receives the Holy Spirit, they are empowered to carry out the work of the Paraclete, the one

who will “*prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned*” (16:8-10).

- “Jesus commissions the community to continue his work by making God in Jesus Christ known in the world and thereby to bring the world to the moment of decision and judgment with regard to sin ... The community is to continue what God sent Jesus to do.” – O’Day.

The fears of the disciple community were well-founded; many of them would be arrested, persecuted, and even martyred for their association with Jesus. But they were not condemned to living behind locked doors, imprisoned by fear; the peace of God that Jesus bestowed upon them was a peace that overcomes fear with the assurance that not even death can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord; they have the assurance that “*not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls*” (Luke 21:18-19). Christ’s word of peace and gift of the Holy Spirit will give them the confidence to unlock the doors, come out of their fear-filled hiding places, and go boldly into the world to share the good news of peace that is the message the faith community that has been empowered and sent out by our Risen Lord is called to proclaim:

- “‘Peace be with you,’ he says twice, as if to encourage them not to lock him out of their lives, lest they miss something he has that is also something they need ... [This is] why the church exists. We’re here to help carry people over the toughest thresholds and into a new future. To remind them that everyone needs oxygen to live – one kind of oxygen for breathing and the other kind for hoping. No one oxygenates life with the hoping variety better than Jesus. To inhale his spirit and his way is to reinflate the soul and allow someone to function with hope again.” – Peter W. Marty.

The faith community’s first challenge in sharing the Gospel message of forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Christ presents itself when Thomas, one of the Twelve, reappears in their gathering. John does not explain why Thomas was absent when Jesus appeared to the disciples; when he returns, they share the good news that “*we have seen the Lord*” (20:25). But Thomas refuses to take the disciples at their word; instead, he insists that “*unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe*” (20:25). Thomas is unaware of the change that has taken place in the community of

disciples, that they are no longer the vain, argumentative, unreliable band of Jesus' followers that he has come to know but are now the Spirit-empowered community of witnesses who have been called, empowered, and sent out to proclaim the forgiveness of sins that is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thomas "*wants personal proof of the resurrection – that the Jesus standing in front of him is the same Jesus who was dead as a doornail just days earlier*" (Marty).

The disciples' announcement to Thomas – "*we have seen the Lord*" – is the same announcement Mary Magdalene made to them after she had seen the Risen Lord. While Thomas has been singled out for his "doubting," none of the disciples seemed to believe Mary's earlier announcement either. Only when Jesus appeared to them and showed them his hands and side did they recognize "the Lord" and rejoice. Thomas is acting no differently from the other disciples; and he will also receive the evidence he needs to believe and to serve as a witness to the resurrection when "*a week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them*" (20:26). While the doors are once again shut, fear is absent from this gathering; through the Holy Spirit the fear that had previously gripped them has been removed. Jesus again appears among them and again greets them with the words "*peace be with you.*" Jesus then turns to Thomas and offers the same evidence he gave to the disciple community: "*Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*" (20:27). The word translated "doubt" is *apistos*, which more accurately means "unbelieving." In showing him the evidence of his crucifixion, Jesus is encouraging Thomas to move from a position of unbelief to belief (*pistos*); "*he explicitly identifies his offer of himself as the motivation for Thomas' move from unbelief to belief.*" (O'Day). Jesus' invitation is all the proof Thomas needs to move from unbelief to belief; he now confesses that Jesus is "*My Lord and my God!*" (20:28) and will join the rest of the apostolic community in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with all people.

- "[Jesus] did not dismiss Thomas from the circle of his friends for failing to trust what the others had told him. On the contrary, Jesus made sure Thomas was included in that circle by coming back and repeating the whole scene a second time for his benefit alone. In the end, no one who was there that night had to take anyone's word for it. They all saw for themselves, and they believed." – Barbara Brown Taylor.

The presence of the Risen Lord transformed the community of disciples from a gathering of fear-filled people caught in the grip of despair and paralyzed by the prospect of what might happen to them into a Spirit-filled community of witnesses

who were empowered to go forth from that place and “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9). Their transformation from fear to confidence and from unbelief to belief did not mean that their apostolic ministry would be free of opposition and strife; the account of the early church’s ministry in the Acts of the Apostles and letters of Paul are filled with accounts of imprisonments, persecution, and martyrdom. The community of Jesus’ disciples has faced suffering and persecution in every generation; yet the mission of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ has continued through even the greatest periods of darkness and opposition, because those who are called to be witnesses to the death and resurrection of Christ have the assurance that “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 8:38-39).

- “ He is not here; he is risen as he said; he goes before you; spread the good news; do not be afraid. You have nothing to fear.’ That is the first, and that is the only message of Easter: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and is not to be found where the dead are. He has told this, and it is so. He is out there ahead of us, and our job is to spread the good news that he lives; and, by the way, relax, stop worrying, stop thinking that it all depends on you. It has been accomplished. It has been done.” – Peter Gomes.

The good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his offering of peace is a message that is of great importance as we enter the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic and the third wave of infections and province-wide shutdowns. We were blessed to be able to gather for worship to celebrate Christ’s resurrection of Easter Sunday and are endeavoring to remain faithful to our calling to be the “*one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church*” in these times of stay-at-home orders, social distancing, and isolation. We continue to live in times that are filled with fear, uncertainty, impatience, and even anger over all that is happening to us; the uncertainty that has become a regular part of our lives has been most unsettling and is causing great distress and anxiety for many people. But as the presence of our Lord cast out the fear that gripped the disciples on that first Easter and gave Thomas the confidence to confess Jesus as his Lord and God, the love of God that is ours in our Lord Jesus Christ is our antidote to fear; for “*there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear*” (1 John 4:18). It is the peace of God in Christ Jesus our crucified and risen Lord that will overcome the fears that we are facing so that we “*might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*” (Luke 1:74).

- “Loving God, inspire by your Holy Spirit those who are afraid of losing hope. Give them a fresh vision of your love, that they may find again what they fear they have lost. Grant them your powerful deliverance; through the one who makes all things new, Jesus Christ our Redeemer.” (ELW Pastoral Care).

Amen.