

**The Second Sunday of Easter
April 7, AD 2002
"Peace Be With You!"
John 20:19-31**

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

19 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. (NIV)

Many of us know this account well. "Jesus Appears to Doubting Thomas" the Sunday School lesson was entitled. We know how it goes: Jesus appears to the disciples, but one of them, Thomas, is not there. When the disciples again see Thomas, they tell him the good news that Jesus is alive. Thomas thinks they're delusional. *"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."* A week later, Jesus appears again. This time, Thomas is there. And sure enough, Jesus

invites him to touch him where the nails and spear had pierced him. Thomas's doubts are swept away, and he says, *"My Lord and my God!"*

Now, this is a wonderful story. It's a true story! But for us, especially those of us who have heard it many times, it can cause some frustration. Maybe I should let sleeping dogs lie, but as I read or hear these words some thoughts race through my mind. Yours too? *Jesus appeared to his disciples. He talked to them. He let them touch him. He brought them peace. That's all good and well-for them. But what the rest of us? I don't get to see Jesus. I don't get to listen to him. Can I have any peace?*

The Bible answers that question with a strong "Yes!" As we again think about this familiar section of the Bible, I pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us to remember that. Jesus still comes to us. He speaks to us. He even touches us. And he says to us what he said to his first disciples: "Peace be with you!"

1. Through your Savior's word

Shalom l'chem was a common greeting in Israel. Still is, I think, even though peace is far from the minds of most who live there. *Shalom l'chem* means "Peace be with you!" These are the simple words Jesus spoke when he appeared alive to his disciples on the first Easter evening.

Those words-Peace be with you-must have taken the disciples by surprise. Peace was likely the last thing on their minds. Think of the last week of their lives...

Only a week before they had shouted "Hosanna!" with the crowds hailing their master as he rode into Jerusalem. But in the next days they had seen Jesus rile the most powerful men in the city. They had seen one of their own number betray him. They had run from him. They had seen or heard the reports of his trials and crucifixion. And they all had learned he was dead. They had hidden themselves away, fearful that those who had crucified their master would do the same to them. But that very morning, the women who had gone to finish embalming him came back from the tomb breathless. The Lord's body was gone! They had seen Jesus alive!

They probably didn't know what to think or feel anymore. They likely did know that they would have no peace until they knew what was going on.

Then Jesus appeared. He stood among them. He spoke to them. He touched them. And in the middle of all their turmoil, he greeted them with words that were at the same time usual and extremely unusual: "Peace be with you!"

How could he say that?

He could say "Peace be with you" because there really was peace for these distraught disciples. They didn't realize yet what had happened in the previous week. Jesus had allowed himself to be arrested and beaten and even executed. He had willingly gone to the cross. He had gone there not because he had sins to pay for in order to make peace with God his Father. He was going there because our sins had to be paid for in order for us to have peace with God. Now that Jesus had finished that work and come back to life, he could proclaim to people that peace was theirs, for he had made peace with God through the shedding of his blood.

Can that peace be ours, though?

It can. Listen again to what else Jesus said to his disciples on that Easter Sunday evening: *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven...* Jesus wanted you and me to have the same peace he gave to his first disciples. So he sent them out with the authority to forgive sins. He still gives Christians that authority, to proclaim to repentant sinners that all their sins are forgiven, paid for in full. There is peace, then, wherever there are Christians. For where Christians are, there is the gospel of peace. When the minister declares to us that our sins are forgiven, that forgiveness is as valid and as certain as if Christ, our Lord, were declaring it to us himself.

And there's more. John writes at the end of this section that he didn't record every last thing that Jesus did-not enough room. But the things he did write down have power. *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.* We have peace still today through the word of Jesus. The things he did and said still have punch, still have impact. These words about Jesus actually bring us peace with God. They give us life, here and hereafter.

Jesus' words brought peace to his first disciples. Jesus' words still bring peace.

2. Through your Savior's touch

The words weren't good enough for Thomas, though. He wanted more. He had doubts. His faith faltered severely. But Jesus, who does not snuff out a smoldering wick, graciously came to his rescue. *"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

Jesus certainly didn't have to make this appearance to Thomas. Thomas shouldn't have needed it. But Jesus came anyway. Typical Jesus. He saw a person's need, a person's weakness, and went the extra mile to address it. Through that touch that he offered to Thomas, Jesus brought peace to a troubled soul and solidity to a shaky faith.

Jesus still comes to us.

He touches us with water and word, washing away our sins and bringing to us all the treasures he won by dying and rising for us.

And in another special, supernatural way, he touches us. Have you ever read page 156 of the hymnal? If you haven't, by all means do. That page is entitled "Personal Preparation for Holy Communion." The questions and answers there lead us to reflect on our need for God's forgiveness and the ways he provides it. It says that God brings us peace through his words of forgiveness, which we just mentioned. And then it goes on to say this: "What further assurance do I have that Jesus is mine and I am his? In Holy Communion he gives me his body and blood under the bread and wine as a truly life-giving food and drink to unite me with him and my fellow believers. By means of this sacrament, Jesus not only forgives my sins but sweeps away all my doubts about his love for me..."

Jesus comes to us under bread and wine and touches us, assuring us that he is really present among us. In his Supper, he touches our lips and says, "My body, not yours, was given into death for your sins. My blood, not yours, was poured out to pay your debt. Therefore you have peace with God. Depart in peace."

In the earliest days of the Christian church, Christians started getting together with one another. It seemed natural. But what, they wondered, should we do when we come together? They decided to remember Jesus. They decided early on to remember that Jesus had risen from the dead, so they began gathering on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day Jesus had risen from the dead. And when they gathered, they listened to people repeating the things that Jesus had

done and taught. People were baptized as Jesus had commanded, and their sins were washed away. They shared a special meal with one another, a simple meal consisting of bread and wine. And you know what? These people found peace. They did not have cheery lives, most of them. Many were harassed and persecuted for being followers of Jesus Christ. Yet they found peace in the word of Jesus. As Peter wrote and we heard earlier, *Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* (1 Peter 1:8,9) They were suffering, yet they had peace. They had new birth into a living hope through Holy Baptism. They had Jesus' body and blood in his Supper. They had the Word of God, and all these things told them that no matter what happened, they were God's, and an eternal inheritance was awaiting them.

Friends, that is true for you and me, for Jesus is here with us in his Word and Sacraments no less than he was his first disciples. And the peace he gives is no less real.

Author Berit Kjos, in his book *A Wardrobe from the King*, tells this story:

Long ago a man sought the perfect picture of peace. Not finding one that satisfied, he announced a contest to produce this masterpiece.

The challenge stirred the imagination of artists everywhere, and paintings arrived from far and wide. Finally the great day of revelation arrived. The judges uncovered one peaceful scene after another, while the viewers clapped and cheered.

The tensions grew. Only two pictures remained veiled.

As a judge pulled the cover from one, a hush fell over the crowd.

A mirror-smooth lake reflected lacy, green birches under the soft blush of the evening sky. Along the grassy shore, a flock of sheep grazed undisturbed. Surely this was the winner. The man with the vision uncovered the second painting himself, and the crowd gasped in surprise. Could this be peace?

A tumultuous waterfall cascaded down a rocky precipice; the crowd could almost feel its cold, penetrating spray. Stormy-gray clouds threatened to explode with lightning, wind and rain. In the midst of the thundering noises and bitter chill, a spindly tree clung to the rocks

at the edge of the falls. One of its branches reached out in front of the torrential waters as if foolishly seeking to experience its full power.

A little bird had built a nest in the elbow of that branch. Content and undisturbed in her stormy surroundings, she rested on her eggs. With her eyes closed and her wings ready to cover her little ones, she manifested peace that transcends all earthly turmoil.*

Jesus did not remove the turmoil from the lives of his first disciples. To be sure, in the years to come the world would rage against them even more than it had in the week of their Lord's crucifixion. Nor does Jesus remove all the turmoil from our lives. We must suffer grief in all kinds of trials. But in the middle of all the "thundering noise and bitter chill", Jesus comes. He speaks to us. He touches us. And he has the blessed audacity to say to us what he said to his first scared disciples: "Peace be with you." *Amen.*