

Easter 2, April 7, 2024

**JOHN 20:19–23.** (EHV)

On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews. Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you! Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you.” After saying this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whenever you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

We talk a lot about peace in Christianity. In the *Kyrie*, I began with the invitation: “In peace let us to pray to the Lord,” and then we prayed “for the peace from above and for our salvation,” and “for the peace of the whole world.” We then sang, “Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” In the *Agnus Dei*, we will ask Christ, the Lamb of God, to have mercy on us and grant us his peace. And of course we will close our service with the blessing: “The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace.”

We do well to pray for peace, and we pray for it on a firm basis, since we see in our Gospel for today that the risen Jesus insists on bringing peace to his disciples. We heard the phrase, “Peace be with you,” from his mouth three times [in John 20:19–31]. This morning let’s consider the kind of peace that Jesus brings, and the content of the peace that he brings.

**1.**

Let’s first consider the kind of peace that the risen Jesus bring us.

In spite of the fact that Jesus had already risen from the dead and had appeared to Mary Magdalene and another Mary, to Simon Peter, and to the two disciples who had just returned to Jerusalem from the village of Emmaus about seven miles away, most of Jesus’s disciples did not have peace. They were gathered together behind locked doors that Easter Sunday evening. Many of them seem to have been cautiously optimistic that the reports of Jesus’s resurrection were true, but not so convinced as to remove their fear of the Jewish leaders. The Jewish leaders three days earlier had managed to get their leader sentenced to crucifixion, and if those leaders now managed to take out just half of the hatred they had for Jesus on his followers, it wouldn’t be pretty. Plus now, with reports beginning to circulate about Jesus’s resurrection, they might set out to silence those reports for good by silencing his followers for good. If it turned out that those reports were not true, they would be in serious trouble.

In short, even though the disciples were physically safe behind locked doors, they did not have peace. They were troubled, anxious, and fearful.

But suddenly Jesus came and stood among them. Where did he come from? How did he get in? They were behind locked doors! It didn’t matter. Locked doors could keep ordinary humans out, but they couldn’t keep the risen Jesus out.

And the first words out of Jesus’s mouth? “Peace be with you.”

“Peace be with you” was one standard Jewish greeting, and still is today. But from the mouth of Jesus, it was anything but standard. Jesus had the ability not just to wish peace upon them or pray for peace upon them, but to give peace to them. And he did. He showed them his

hands and side, so that they would know it was truly he from the nail marks in his hands and the scar in his side where he had been pierced. Once they knew it was Jesus, the peace he spoke upon them was theirs.

What had Jesus changed about their outward circumstances? Nothing. Jesus appearing to them alive and speaking peace upon them changed nothing about the hostility of the Jewish leaders. They were just as hostile as they were before, as the book of Acts clearly shows. They could still make the disciples' lives miserable, inflict pain on them, throw them in prison, even have them put to death. In fact, you could argue that Jesus made their outward circumstances worse by telling them that he would be sending them from the safety of their locked room out into the hostile world. They would not only forgive some people's sins, but they would also retain other people's sins, that is, withhold forgiveness from others. Withholding forgiveness certainly would not make everyone their friends. But the disciples still had peace.

So we see what kind of peace the risen Jesus brings us. It is not an earthly peace. Earthly peace is obtained by changing outward circumstances. If there is poverty, peace comes by alleviating or ending it. If there is war, peace comes by one side surrendering and by a treaty that brings the warfare to an end. If there is illness, peace comes when it is successfully treated or otherwise overcome. If there is danger, peace comes by the threat passing or being removed. Think of how we tense up when there is a tornado warning, and the tension doesn't pass until the warning expires.

But that isn't what happens here. Here the outward circumstances don't change at all. What changes is not what's on the outside, but what's on the inside. What changes is the hearts of the disciples. Just as Jesus came through locked doors and stood among them inside the room, so also through his word of peace Jesus comes through the outward circumstances and stands inside of our hearts and changes them, so that we have peace, even though the threats and dangers and hardships still dominate and rage on the outside. This is why Christian funerals are some of the most interesting phenomena to be a part of. You'll see plenty of tears; you might even hear people sobbing. But before the funeral, and especially at the meal afterward, after the peace of Jesus has been brought to bear through God's word, you'll also see smiles and even hear laughter. The air is not heavy and stifling. There is peace.

On Holy Thursday Jesus had told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, and do not let it be afraid." Now on Easter he shows them what he meant by that. He gives them peace not from their troubles, but in spite of them and in the midst of them.

## 2.

But what did their peace actually consist of? What was its content?

The Gospel text itself gives us some indication. It says that the disciples "rejoiced when they saw the [risen] Lord." Peace goes hand in hand with joy. When Paul later listed the fruits of the Spirit, he put joy side by side with peace (Gal. 5:22). When he wrote to the Romans that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, he immediately went on to say that we rejoice confidently on the basis of our hope for the glory of God and that we rejoice confidently in our sufferings (Rom. 5:1-3). And later he told them that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). On

Holy Thursday, Jesus told his disciples that, although they had sorrow now, he would see them again and their heart would rejoice, and no one would take their joy away from them (John 16:22).

Here, too, just like with peace, this joy does not mean that Christians always go around with a smile plastered on their faces, that they're always giggly and bubbly. It rather means that even when things trouble and grieve them, even when they have occasion to be sad and to weep, there is at the same time a happiness in their heart that no one can take away from them, a bedrock or safety net of joy that keeps their souls from plummeting into the sorrow of hell.

And what is the basis of this peace and joy? "He showed them his hands and side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you! Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you.' After saying this, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whenever you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'" Just as the Father sent Jesus, so now Jesus was sending his disciples and he now sends us.

How did the Father send Jesus? He sent him as his beloved Son. "This is my Son, whom I love," he announced more than once. So Jesus sends us as beloved sons of God and as his own beloved brothers. The Father sent Jesus with authority, authority to forgive and withhold forgiveness, authority over the devil and his kingdom. So Jesus sends us with the same authority. And if Jesus sends us out with that kind of authority, then we ourselves must be forgiven. We ourselves must share in his victory over the devil. If Jesus entrusts us with the keys of the kingdom of heaven, then we ourselves must be heirs and citizens of heaven.

And Jesus's words must be true. After all, there he stands, inside a locked room that he wasn't in just a minute ago, with nail marks in his hands and feet and a scar in his side, showing that he has paid the dreadful, deadly price for our sins, yet he is as alive and well as can be. If he has power over our worst enemy, if he keeps his word about dying and rising from the dead, then all his other words and promises must be true as well.

If we don't have this peace, it's because we're not seeing Jesus. We're not looking at his hands and side, seeing what we deserved to suffer for our sins, seeing that he suffered it for us, in our place. If we don't have this peace, it's because we're not seeing that he is risen from the dead, to prove that he has won our salvation, to prove that heaven is ours, to prove that he has power over all our enemies and has already conquered them. If we don't have this peace, it might be because, like Thomas at first, we're not gathered with the disciples among whom the risen Jesus comes and stands. "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them," Jesus said (Matt. 18:20). It's our fellow believers who assure us that what we're seeing is true, that Jesus really is risen from the dead. It's not an illusion or hallucination; we're not just playing make-believe. If we don't have this peace, it's because we're not listening to his word, which gives peace to us, and gives us the power and authority to give it to others.

Now let's not misunderstand Jesus. Jesus isn't giving us the keys of the kingdom of heaven to use arbitrarily. We can't just go around and randomly say, "You're forgiven. You're forgiven. You—hmm, you're not forgiven. You're forgiven. You're definitely not forgiven," however we wish.

No, Jesus entrusts us with the keys of the kingdom of heaven to use according to his word and will. The ability to forgive, what we also call the loosing key, we are to use on the penitent—

that is, those who recognize their sins and are sorry for them. The ability to withhold forgiveness and retain people's sins, what we also call the binding key, we are to use on the impenitent—that is, those who stubbornly continue in their sins in spite of being admonished. If people are sorry and we do not forgive them—and it does not matter the sin—Jesus will not stand behind that with his own authority. The same is true if we announce God's forgiveness to people who are not penitent, thereby making them bold in their sin.

But when we use the keys of the kingdom of heaven according to Jesus's word and will, it is as if Jesus himself were standing there and announcing forgiveness or withholding forgiveness with his own mouth and voice. When I announce the absolution at the beginning of the service, I do so because you have just finished confessing your sins. If you mean what you are saying, then you also can and should believe the forgiveness I am announcing as if the risen Jesus were right here saying it himself, because he is; he's just doing it through his called servant. And you can do the same with your family members and others who sin against you.

Isn't that forgiveness—the same forgiveness you also received in your baptism and that you also receive in the Lord's Supper—the most solid basis for peace and joy? Jesus didn't just die. He died for you. Jesus didn't just rise. He rose for you. He doesn't just say, "Peace"; he says, "Peace be with you." He doesn't just forgive sins; he forgives your sins. He didn't just win eternal life; he won eternal life for you. In the meantime, he didn't just send his disciples who were present that first Easter; he sends you, with his peace, with his joy, with his love, with his authority, with his good news, with his forgiveness.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And because he is risen, he brings us peace, not an earthly peace, but a heavenly peace, peace in our hearts, the peace that passes understanding and lasts into eternity. Amen.