

Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

Peace Be With You

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When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jewish people, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰After Jesus said this, he showed the disciples his hands and his side. ²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When Jesus had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin*), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But Thomas said to them, '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.'

²⁶ A week later Jesus' disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷Then Jesus said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. --John 20: 19-29

Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, what a strange time we live in. Almost six weeks of quarantine, and the future is still hazy and uncertain. We wait and wait to see what happens next. Whether we are calm or anxious or simply missing our friends and the way life was before Covid 19 began, speak a word of hope to us today. O God, I pray that you might pour through me the gift of preaching, that these words might reach us where we are. And we know that they will for we pray in the name of Jesus, the Risen Christ that we pray. Amen.

Yesterday at the grocery store while waiting in line 6 feet away from the person in front of me, I noticed that Time Magazine's cover said "The Age of Anxiety." I usually try to preach what I most need to hear and hope it will connect with you as well. This time, I knew I was on the right track. Doubting Thomas. Anxiety. Peace. It's as if it were meant to be.

Consider the parallels:

- The disciples were in crisis. We are in crisis.

- The disciples were scared. We are scared.
- The disciples were uncertain about the future. We are definitely uncertain about the future.
- The disciples were huddled up behind closed doors. We are huddled up behind closed doors.
- The disciples wondered what was next? We wonder what is next?
- The disciples were in shock. We, too, are experiencing shock.

In the story Jesus spoke to them. Jesus speaks to us, too. Four little words. “Peace Be With You.” This morning we are going to explore how these words might be helpful in such a time as this.

In John’s Gospel this morning, we find the disciples hiding and afraid that they too might be imprisoned if they were recognized as Jesus’ followers. That morning Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter and John reported that Jesus’ body was missing from the tomb. Mary stayed behind at the tomb and said later she had seen the Risen Lord. The disciples were talking things over, the way people do when they cannot make sense of things. Had the guards taken the body? Was it stolen by someone else? Did Mary see a ghost? CNN would say she was reporting fake news. The disciples tried to sort things out. None of it made much sense.

Thomas is missing on the night when Jesus comes back and visits the disciples behind closed doors. Frederick Buechner suggests maybe he went out to get everyone food, or maybe he just went to sit on a park bench and feed the pigeons. The point is, Thomas was not there when it happened. Even though the doors were locked, the Risen Christ came and stood among the disciples in that upper room, and said, “Peace be with you.” When they couldn’t believe their eyes, Jesus showed them the marks from the nails in his hands and feet, and said again: “Peace be with you.”

When Thomas came back and they tell him what he has missed, he said, “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.” He becomes known as “Doubting Thomas.” A week later, the disciples are back in the same room, and the doors are closed. This time Thomas is there. Again, Jesus comes

and stands in their midst and says: “Peace be with you.” May all good things be yours. And Thomas falls to his knees, and cries out: “My Lord, my God.”

Within a few verses, Jesus repeats the peace blessing three times: “Peace be with you.” This past month as I prayed, I repeated these four words a lot. When I was anxious, I said to myself *Peace be with you*. When I was scared that members of our congregation might come down with the virus, I said: *Peace be with you*. When I was concerned with how I could possibly balance work and homeschooling during this pandemic, I repeated: *peace be with you*, over and over again to myself. Those of you with elementary kids, know it is quite a juggling act. And when we missed our friends and family so much it literally hurt, we picked up our phones and Facetimed them to say hello, we miss you. Were we not saying to them as well: Peace be with you.

One question I think the Scripture addresses so beautifully this morning is it possible to find peace in the midst of a crisis? Reformed theologian Shirley Guthrie says, “When you don’t know what the future holds, Scripture tells us we do know who holds the future.”ⁱ That is the message of Easter. That is the good news of Jesus Christ. Is it possible to find peace in a crisis? Remember who holds the future. I am going to ask you to close your eyes, put your hands in your laps, and breathe deeply a few times. With your eyes closed, ask yourself *where are you worried about the future?* And each time, breathe in the words -*Peace Be With You*. Let’s do that together now for 20 seconds.

Another question the Scripture raised for me this morning, was how do you make peace with where you are in life? So often, we complain to God and ask God to change

things. If I could only have a shorter commute, a larger house, a more understanding boss, better clients, a more loving spouse, a bigger bank account. Individually and as a church, I wonder sometimes if we are not trying to get back to the glory days of our past. At the same time, we cannot get to the future we want fast enough. We can only be where we are today. When we can finally say, “today I am exactly where I am supposed to be,” peace begins.ⁱⁱ *Close your eyes again. Put your hands in your lap. Breathe in deeply a few times and say, **Today I am exactly where I am supposed to be.** Peace be with me. Now let’s do that for 20 seconds.*

The last spiritual question the Scripture raised for me this morning was about the relationships in my life.

Henri Nouwen, the great theologian, once reminded us that community is never easy. "Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives nearby." This causes friction. Hurt feelings. Sometimes a dust up.

I think it is interesting that when Jesus talks about peace in this passage, he also talks about forgiveness. The two are inextricably linked. Forgiveness is necessary for peace between friends, family, and colleagues.

What is God’s vision of peace? Peace is about universal flourishing, delight, and community. Peace, in short, is God’s vision of the way things are supposed to be. Peace be with you is a blessing that means may things be for you the way they are supposed to be. May you have peace in all parts of your life.

Close your eyes a final time. Put your hands in your lap. Breathe in deeply for 20 seconds and pray for the people in your life, your

friends, your family, your colleagues. Send peace to them.

Four little words, peace be with you. I think you will find that 2,000 years later, these four words are still life changing. Amen.

ⁱShirley Guthrie, Christian Doctrine.

ⁱⁱ Therese of Liseux, well known prayer, “May today there be peace within.”