

Second Sunday of Easter – April 27 & 28, 2014
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

John 20:19-31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, **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's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." 24) Now Thomas (also known as 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." 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 performed many other 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 Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In the name of our risen and living Lord;

What if? Why? What about the future? These are simple questions that each of us ask ourselves frequently. But have you ever noticed how often those questions tend to rob us of our peace? Doubts, fears, uncertainties and questions often rob us of peace. We're not alone in feeling this – the men in our text knew all about what it feels like to be unsettled. It was Easter Sunday evening – the end of what had been a rather long and unsettling weekend – it started with the celebration of a religious holiday, known as the Passover on Thursday evening. They had gathered to observe the feast with Jesus. While they were eating Jesus warned them that one of them would betray him – all of them questioned their faithfulness to the Lord, but Judas was the one who committed the dastardly deed. Then the Lord warned Peter that he would deny him – all of them said that they would be willing to die rather than to deny the Lord. But when push came to shove – they ran away in fear. Peter did deny the Lord, not just once but three times. When Judas saw that Jesus was going to be crucified he took his own life. The Roman soldiers crucified Jesus on Friday while most of those who had gathered with Jesus in the upper room were nowhere to be found. Surely they must have felt ashamed of their unfaithfulness, embarrassed by their pride in addition to feeling like cowards as they hid behind locked doors to say nothing of how their nagging doubts regarding the various reports they had heard about Jesus' resurrection must have made them feel. Perhaps they had already heard the "rumors" that the guards had been paid to spread that they had stolen Jesus' body. If so those rumors only fueled their fear of the Jews. Sorrow, bewilderment, fear, cautious hope and even unbelief had all infiltrated the ranks of these followers of Christ.

We've all experienced one or more of these emotions, I'm sure. That makes it easy for us to relate to these men at least to some degree.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Peace be with you – those were Jesus' first words when he came and stood among them that first Easter evening. Peace be with you – those are Jesus' words to you today.

PEACE BE WITH YOU

1. You have peace because Jesus has assured us of his resurrection (19-20)
2. You have peace because Jesus has assured us of his forgiveness (21-23)
3. You have peace because Jesus removes doubts (24-31)

In one way or another, the unsettled feelings which had come over the disciples were connected to their uncertainties regarding Jesus. In a remarkable manner Jesus came to remove those uncertainties. He didn't bother knocking at the door – that would have only made the disciples more afraid – they would have suspected it was a trick by the Jews. Jesus simply appeared in their midst with his real but glorified body. He stood there for them to see with their own eyes. He came with his comfort – Peace be with you. His appearance assured them of his resurrection which in turn gave them peace.

20) After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Jesus wanted them to be sure of his resurrection so that they in turn could be sure of the peace he was bringing to them. He let them see the battle wounds which had won them peace – Isaiah the prophet reminds us: **He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him...**

Of course the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord – we know that joy too, don't we? Isn't that the true joy of our recent Easter celebration? He lives! He lives and brings us peace. Their joy stemmed from the fact that the one they had denied and abandoned had not denied and abandoned them. He came to show his loving concern for them, to remove their fears, to meet their needs, to assure them not only of his resurrection but also of his forgiveness – God's forgiveness for all their sins.

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."

One of the most important lessons from this text is in Jesus' words: **"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven."** It is of no small significance that, according to John, these are among the first words from the Risen Lord to His chosen bunch, after greeting them with **"Peace be with you."** Near the top of all the sins needing forgiveness is the skepticism and dullness that kept the disciples and us from latching on to the promises of God.

Jesus makes it clear that his peace comes from a sending away or a forgiveness of sins. This is the peace between God and men through his work. It's peace of conscience for the sinner. And amazingly enough Jesus not only assures us of this peace – he commissions his church to proclaim that peace. Most often of course we think of our pastors when it comes to hearing someone announce to us the peace of God that comes through forgiveness – one of the greatest privileges I enjoy as your pastor is to be able to announce the peace of God to you. Somewhere in almost every one of our services we include a confession of our sins, just as we did today. And that confession is always followed by the assurance of God's forgiveness – an assurance which is just as valid and certain as if our dear Lord were speaking it us himself. Go in peace. Your sins are forgiven – those are often the words I use to dismiss those who approached the Lord's altar to receive the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. I can say those words and you can be confident of that peace because Jesus has assured you of his resurrection and your forgiveness in this text.

The authority to free the penitent – those who confess their sins, desire the Lord's forgiveness and desire with his help to live lives which are pleasing in his sight – from the guilt and eternal consequences of their sin conveys peace to us. Where this forgiveness must be withheld due to impenitence and unbelief there will be no peace. Tragically the sins of the impenitent remain with them or as our text says they are not forgiven.

It's important to note that before telling His disciples that people's sins are forgiven when they forgive them, Jesus said, **"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."** The members of the Lord's Church must never forget that people's sins are not being forgiven if we are not out there bringing God's forgiveness to them! This is an authority which has been entrusted to all believers – the authority to share God's peace with others. In the words of an English theologian (William Temple), the church "is the only society on earth which exists for the benefit of the non-members." The very moment that ceases to be true is the moment when we revert to a group of doubters for whom the Resurrection is only a rumor, and it is time once again to lock the doors!

And speaking of doubters – let's take another look at our text to discover how Jesus gives us peace by removing our doubts. It seems that Thomas is always the one disciple who is stereo-typed as the doubter. Doubting Thomas we call him – and it's no wonder the name has stuck. Every time we hear of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances we hear of Thomas' doubts.

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."

But let's back up a week for a moment. When Jesus showed up in that room on that first Easter Sunday evening it is important to remember that the women had already been to the empty tomb. Peter and John had also been there and Mary had already told them that she had "seen the Lord!" Cleopas and a friend had also seen Jesus on the road and told the story to the disciples. After hearing from these witnesses, the eleven still did not believe Jesus had risen -- there were ten doubters in the room and one out of it! To label poor Thomas as "the" doubter, or to dub him, "Doubting Thomas," is a piece of prejudice. John tells us that **"The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord."** That the sentence follows John's earlier report that the Lord had **"showed them His hands and His side."** Let it be no surprise that, when the ten told the whole thing to Thomas some time later, he wanted to see for himself. They had not believed until they had seen -- why should he?

And the Lord would give Thomas that very opportunity (providing us with another assurance of his resurrection to remove our doubts too): **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."**

With an act of pure grace – the Lord Jesus allowed Thomas to hear and see for himself the same thing the other disciples had seen and heard a week earlier. Peace be with you Thomas – the peace that comes from having all your doubts removed. The peace that comes from believing that I am your Lord and God – the one who bought you with his own blood and rescued you from the grasp of sin – the one who calls you to faith and service. From Jesus' willingness to reach out to Thomas we learn of Jesus' concern for us and his desire for us to enjoy his blessings.

Jesus comes to us one on one and accepts us as we are. Let's remember that He even comes again and again to those of us who were for some reason or another missing when He came the first time. Let us rejoice in the fact that He dismisses no one on the basis of labels -- not "lepers, lame, blind, poor, doubters, thieves (on crosses or off), prostitutes, tax collectors, publicans," or even "sinners." Thanking Him for His gracious blindness to such labels is good. Following Him and being like Him is even better.

Finally, note the words of Jesus to Thomas: **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."** Our temptation is to think that Thomas was particularly blessed by the Lord because Jesus returned so that he could see for himself. Jesus set that record straight. You and I are the ones who are blessed because we have not seen and yet believe!

I have not had the opportunity to look into Jesus' eyes, but He is my Lord and my God. Where my life doesn't show that, it's because I am still in His body shop, in need of additional repairs. God isn't finished with me yet. As a matter of fact, the biggest frustration of my life is that every time I turn around I find another dent that needs to be straightened out. Sometimes I think I must have been left out in a monstrous hailstorm. At the same time, the church is a great body shop. In spite of all our dings and wrinkles we are Christ's Body at work in the world. There is plenty of room yet for all kinds of people – all those whose lives are broken down with doubts, shattered relationships, addictions and a list of sins that would make the devil blush – all are welcomed by our Lord. After calling them into his church the Lord has an assignment for them.

The Head Mechanic is still sending them back out to find others and tow them in. It is dangerous out there. The chances are someone will back into us if not take us head on. If you are like me, you will probably run over something you should have avoided and wind up flat on the side of the road. But – and don't take my word on this; don't even take the word of Thomas; take God's Word – Jesus will come again in His Word and Sacrament to forgive, restore and renew us. Oh, yes, and He will send us out again – filled with his peace to share his peace – the peace that comes from the assurance of his resurrection, from the assurance of forgiveness and the peace that comes because he has removed our doubts with his word.

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Amen.