

Peace Be With You!

April 7, 2024

Shepherd's Grace Church

19 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 Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; 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.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he 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 his 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.'²⁷ Then he 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.'²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'²⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20: 19-31)

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—²this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.⁴ We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do

what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the entire world (1John 1: 1-2: 2)

It is the first Sunday after Easter and today, we can rejoice! Last week, we gathered and if we were listening to the disciples, there was no rejoicing, at least not at sunrise or daybreak, or during the day. Rejoicing came later, but on that first day there was only fear, uncertainty, and sorrow.

Perhaps that was because the events of the day started in darkness. In 1John this morning we hear that Jesus is the light of the world. Perhaps the reality of his resurrection could only be appreciated in the fullness of the light. Mary, who came to the tomb early, while it was still dark did not go up to look in the tomb. Instead, she ran away in darkness filled with fear and a sense of foreboding!

Today, however, the light has been shined on the situation. By the end of the day, we know the truth. Christ the Lord is risen! He is the light that has come into the world and even darkness cannot overcome it! (John 1) According to 1John, He is the one who has taken away the sin of the entire world. Do we, those of us who have sinned fully appreciate this gift of grace that was poured out for us? Did the first group of disciples?

When I was in my last semester of seminary, I was given the privilege of preaching in seminary chapel. Chapel was three days a week and it was mandatory. That means there were large crowds of people in the congregation. My assigned day to preach was the Tuesday after Easter. The following day, Warren Carter, my Bible New Testament professor and one of the most knowledgeable people about the Bible I had ever met was scheduled to preach.

The text I had chosen to preach on was from Isaiah 43: 1-7. It is one of my favorites and in fact, was one I alluded to last week in the Easter sermon. My focus was on forgiveness and adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. In the first few verses of the Isaiah passage, the Lord reminds the people of Israel that they have been called by name. The Lord knows their name...the

Lord knows your name. I find it very comforting that when I pass through times of trouble as did the people of Israel and I suspect all of you, the Lord knows my name.

In my message on that Tuesday in seminary, I invited people to consider this from a fuller perspective. The people I had been working with, learning about, and trying to understand more completely could not imagine anyone caring enough about them to know their name, know their hurt, know their pain. In many cases, they were still learning about all they had suffered. So great was their pain and their shame that many of them had repressed their memories of the heinous events that shaped their past and, they also thought, their future.

To have someone call them by name and acknowledge their existence was beyond their comprehension. To have someone walk with them on their journey, to hear them and to trust them was unheard of. To have someone believe them because they said it was so was simply unthinkable.

This morning, as we hear the words of John, I invite you to keep in mind that there are many in this world who are not heard, are not believed, are thought of as "less than" and who are simply not seen. In the verse just before our text today, Mary came back to the disciples and said, "I have seen the Lord, and she told them everything He had said and made known to her." They chose to ignore or to simply not hear her words.

"On that evening, the evening of the first day of the week, the disciples were gathered together, and the door was locked on account of fear." The text suggests that it was on account of fear of the Jews. I prefer to acknowledge that it was on account of fear of the leaders of the Jews, and I say this because not all were intent on the crucifixion. Just as an aside, I think statements such as the one used by John in this text have perpetuated antisemitic attitudes over the centuries. When we as believers in Jesus as Messiah group all people into a single attitude, a prejudice tends to form. We are called to love all people and by categorizing all as the same, we create an attitude that can perpetuate hatred or certainly dislike.

At any rate, the disciples found themselves afraid. John suggests their fear was of the "Leaders of the Jews." This would certainly be a logical assertion. The leaders of the Jews had illegally tried Jesus at night, taken Him to Herod and to Pilate for judgment, argued for crucifixion and watched with seeming satisfaction as their wishes were carried out. They had put out arrest warrants for the disciples and had accused Peter of being one of his followers. For the disciples to be afraid of the leaders of the Jews was a natural reaction.

Still, there was another reason for the disciples to be afraid, a reason even more fear provoking than that fear of the leaders of the Jews. You see, all the disciples save one abandoned Jesus on that night of his trial. When he was arrested, they fled. When he was questioned, they stayed hidden. When he was crucified they stood at a distance, unwilling to be associated with Him!

Peter, the one who said he would even die for Jesus denied Him three times on that fateful night. Judas betrayed Him and handed him over to the authorities. The only one who remained loyal to Jesus was the "other disciple" the one whom Jesus loved.

There is no evidence that the "other disciple" was present on that evening, the first evening of the week. Judas had already gone out and it is likely the disciples knew that he had taken his own life. Probably, his actions even further perpetuated their fear.

You see, while the disciples were afraid of the "Leaders of the Jews," they were equally afraid to confront Jesus Himself. They had abandoned Him, denied him, and distanced themselves from Him. When Mary brought the good news to them, they did not rejoice, they did not sing, "Christ the Lord Has Risen Today." Instead, they imagined in their own hearts how they had disappointed Him and let him down. Perhaps their worst fear was the fear of confrontation with the risen Lord. How would he judge them? How would he receive them? How might he rebuke them?

The doors were locked and suddenly, Jesus appeared in their midst. We struggle with the palpable pause. What is going to happen? How will Jesus judge them and this situation? And in an instant we know! "Peace be with you," he says.

There is just something about that word, that wonderful, total, and complete expression issued in a single word. Shalom would have been the word he used. The Hebrew word for peace. In our culture, we use it as a casual greeting, a "How ya doin'" acknowledgement that someone else had come into our presence. For us children of the '60's we might associate it with two fingers in a "v" sign and a phrase like "peace out," or something similar.

For people of faith in "Biblical Times," the word was one of the most formal and affirming phrases available. The word Shalom means "nothing missing and nothing broken." It is the most treasured of greetings and dismissals possible. Extended, it means that all is well. In the 1600's Julian of Norwich appropriated it as her famous mantra, "all is well, and all is well, and every kind of thing shall be well." Shalom offers comfort and care from one individual to another and from its very meaning, it implies that the person

receiving the greeting should know from the greeter, "your troubles are my troubles, and my troubles are your troubles. From this point on, nothing will be missing and nothing in our relationship or that we work on together will be broken!"

Shalom, Jesus said to his disciples. Peace be with you! If ever there was a greeting that would put the disciples' hearts at ease, it is this greeting. At once all their fears about Jesus' judgment of them would be melted away. All the concerns they might have had about their betrayal, their denial, their abandonment would instantly be set aside. With this greeting, their heartaches and sense of loss would be transformed into a moment of utter jubilation.

The disciples were in the upper room, the same place they had shared their last meal with Jesus. The room was in Jerusalem, the city of peace and from the very earliest of times, the city was special to the people whom God had chosen as his ambassadors to the world. At the moment, the disciples were terrified. John says they were frightened on account of the Jews. I have suggested that they were even more frightened on account of Mary's report that Jesus was alive. In either case, when Jesus comes to greet them, their fears are at once set aside.

This is exactly what God intends from this place. From the first time Abraham sets foot on this soil, it is God's desire that it should be a place of peace. It is to be a place where fears abate. Abraham came to know this intent when returning from a battle. In Genesis 14, he came to this place, this Jerusalem that was both already and not yet. It was already a place of peace, but it was unknown to Abraham.

Abraham was greeted in the place by the high priest and the king of Salem. The priest's name was Melchizedek. It is telling that he is identified as both a priest and a king. In all of scripture, only two are referred to as both priest and king. Melchizedek and Jesus. I claim that the two are one. Jesus, the prophet, priest, and king broke into time for the very first time in this place and represented himself to Abraham as the priest and king of Salem, the city of peace.

Later, this very place was bought by one of Abraham's relatives and became the city of Jerusalem. When Jesus comes to his disciples in Jerusalem, at the upper room, he comes to them just as he had to Abraham so long ago. In his return, he reminded them of the bread he broke and the cup from which he drank with them, and if you are willing to see, with their ancestor Abraham.

Here, in this place of peace, this place where He had appeared to their ancestor centuries earlier, the Prince of Peace, the high priest and creator of the universe appeared to the disciples, so frightened and forlorn on this evening of their greatest apprehension. In this, the ultimate place of peace, the original Salem, and the new Jerusalem (perhaps the cite of the ultimate New Jerusalem of which John refers in the book of Revelation) Jesus offers the disciples "Peace!"

Could it be that the High Priest and the King of Salem, the Messiah of the world arrived at this moment for any other purpose than to commission those who were commissioned by God in the calling of Abraham so long ago? The evangelist John is not a believer in coincidence, and neither am I. God has orchestrated this gathering, this moment for precisely this purpose.

Shalom, Jesus says to the disciples. Nothing is missing, nothing is broken. All is well and as it should be. (On the road to Emmaus, Jesus tells Cleophas and the other disciple exactly this same thing as he says, "Did He not tell you that the son of Man must undergo great suffering and be killed before being raised up on the third day?") What he was saying and what they finally understood is that all that has taken place had to unfold exactly as it did. Jesus had to suffer and die so that we might live.

Their question, and yours is, "But why?" Why did He have to die so that I might live. Habakkuk tells us in chapter 1 that God cannot look upon sin. So great is God's love for us that God wants to restore right relationship with a people that have "All sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God." (Romans 3) Jesus, the one who was and is sinless took upon Himself all our sin so that we might be made sinless and therefore once again worthy to stand in the presence of God!

When Jesus greets them their sin has been taken away and all the shortcomings about which they were so apprehensive have been eliminated. When Jesus greets them, His death has made their life possible, and every kind of thing is made well. Shalom.

To demonstrate the wellness, Jesus shows them His hands and His side. They see the pain He had to endure and at the same time they experience His living presence. They recognize that He is alive! They recognize that He has overcome death and is actually and physically present with them. In this moment, they can receive his greeting, accept His presence, and know that it is indeed the Lord! Jesus, who was dead, is now alive and in their midst. He has forgiven them all their sins, their betrayal, denial, and abandonment. They accept that His presence has made all things well. They are at peace!

Jesus does not allow them to rest in that peace, however. At once, he breathes on them. For those of us who have studied and considered Genesis 1 and 2, this breath should be quite familiar. There is a Hebrew word "ruach" which has three meanings to us. Wind, breath, and Spirit. In Genesis 1, God speaks. He puts forth a word, God's ruach. From this word proceeds all of creation beginning with light. That light which proceeds from God's mouth is the "Light of the world." Jesus.

In John's gospel, we know that in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God and all things came into being from the word. This Ruach, this word brought all things into being and in so doing brought all of creation into being. In Genesis 2, God creates the first human out of the earth, (Adama) and God breathes God's Ruach, God's breath or Spirit into the human and there is human life.

In John's gospel from today, this same breath is given to the disciples with a command. They are to go out into the world and share the "Good News." Having received this very breath from God, they possess God's Holy Spirit. Armed with this new Spirit, they can offer to others that which was offered to them. Shalom!

Commanded by Jesus, they were to give Shalom to others as a means of offering the forgiveness Jesus has given to them. In this Spirit of forgiveness, nothing is missing and nothing is broken. With the full power of God's unlimited and amazing grace, they are charged with judging that which is sinful on earth and either holding it bound or releasing it.

The disciples, having just been forgiven by Jesus for unthinkable sins themselves, now have the responsibility of accusing others of sins, sins I might add that are not nearly so heinous as their own, or of forgiving others of sins. Imagine the awesomeness of their assignment.

Just moments have passed from the reality of the disciple's plight. They were sitting in an upper room; dejected and doubting; afraid and immobilized. Their fear of the leaders of the Jews and their fear of condemnation by Jesus whom they loved left them paralyzed. Suddenly, the Jesus of whom they were terrified appeared and offered them a pardon and with that pardon a new assignment; to go out into the world and offer to others the same gift that has been given to them!

How would you react? Would you offer others the same grace that has been offered to you? Would you invite others to know Love beyond measure? Would you give as Jesus has given or would you judge the sins of others more harshly than you have been judged?

Having received the Holy Spirit, the disciples went out into the world and as circumstance would have it, the first person they came across was one of the disciples who was not there on the night Jesus appeared to them. They met Thomas and their first words to him were, "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas was understandably skeptical. In fact, he said, "I will never believe unless I see."

His is an easy response to understand. What his friends were sharing with him was a difficult proposition to consider. After all, he had stood on a hill far from Jesus as He hung on the cross. Thomas watched the events of the day unfold; he watched Jesus carry the cross to Calvary. He watched the soldiers nail Him to the tree. He watched as Jesus cried out in pain, as the sky turned to black, as our savior breathed his last. He watched as Jesus died and now he was being told that it was otherwise. How would you respond? How would any of us? He said, "Show me!"

Just a week later, the disciples were again gathered in the upper room. Thomas was there this time and again the door was locked. Suddenly, Jesus came and stood among them. Shalom, he said. Peace be with you. Then he turned to Thomas.

If I were Thomas, I would be feeling all the fears and apprehensions the disciples felt a week earlier. I abandoned Him, I denied Him, I doubted Him. How can he love me?

This year, as I have studied this passage, I have come to a somewhat different conclusion than in my past readings. I have always assumed and have never been corrected when I interpreted this passage, that Jesus spoke to Thomas with some mild derision. My sharing of the scripture with a congregation has always been done with Jesus' tone toward Thomas being somewhat critical; a "Here, Thomas. You doubted me! Now stick your fingers in the nail marks and your hands in my side approach with a judgmental tone to the remarks!

As I have read other sources and reflected on the grace poured out upon the other disciples just the week before, I must conclude that I believe Jesus would have acted consistently with Thomas. I believe He would have offered a welcoming embrace and an encouraging invitation to see and to touch and to believe. His admonition, "Do not doubt, but believe," would have come to Thomas as the same comforting invitation Jesus offered to the others just a week earlier.

It is important that we consider this kind of response. It is important for two reasons. First, this response presents a consistent response from our savior. Just because Thomas was not there a week earlier does not in any way mean

he should be criticized. It simply means that now is the time! Now is the time for Thomas to hear the same command that the others heard earlier. Now in the first century! Now in the twenty-first century! Now is the time, whenever we encounter the invitation to believe in Jesus as our savior. Now is the time to believe!

Warren Carter, in his sermon the next day dramatized this understanding. He reminded us that the meanies were still out even a few days after Easter. People were still honking horns and shouting epithets. People were still arguing and fighting among themselves. Yes, the meanies were still out, and perhaps they just had not reached the inescapable conclusion that everything has changed.

Second, the response to an invitation is one that I desperately hope will be offered repeatedly. Just as it was offered to Thomas a second time, so too, may it be offered to me and to you a second or a third or a fourth time. God's desire is for all of us to accept this invitation. Just as Paul writes to the Philippians, "One day every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Until then, how much better for us to make that proclamation now. (Phil. 2: 10 paraphrased)

As the author of John concludes, there are many other signs Jesus performed before His disciples, but these have been included so that you may know He is the Messiah and that you might have life in His name! Amen!