

Easter 2, 2023

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*Peace Be with You*

John 20:19-31

What stood out in this morning's gospel? Perhaps the story of Thomas, the twin, who questioned the resurrected Jesus when he appeared to him.

I will also remember Thomas this morning, and but first, did you notice how Jesus' appearance and words changed the atmosphere in the locked room? Or how a simple blessing can make a difference?

Three years earlier, Jesus called the 12 disciples to leave their work, and families and follow him with the promise that they were to be fishers of men. These men risked everything because in Jesus they saw a divine light.

The disciples recognized that they were being called to something greater than themselves. They knew that with Jesus teaching them, they would be equipped for the journey into the unknown that lay ahead. They would grow in faith. They would be a part of a ministry that would change the world.

The disciples did grow together and became brothers and friends. They watched as Jesus performed his miracles of healing and they listened to his every word and every lesson he shared.

Then, the Rabbi they loved, who loved them beyond all measure, was crucified, died and was placed in a tomb.

In John's gospel this morning, the disciples are huddled together, behind a locked door in fear of the Jews. There are now 11 disciples remaining but only 10 are present as Thomas is not among them. The events of the weekend have shaken them to the core. Their beloved Messiah, rabbi, friend and brother was arrested, tried in kangaroo courts and sentenced to die. First century courts in Roman occupied Jerusalem did not offer an opportunity to appeal a death sentence.

Other Jews had turned against one of their own and now the disciples are in fear of being put to death in the same manner for being followers of Jesus. To everyone's consternation, Jesus' body which was carefully placed in the tomb has

disappeared. The disciples are feeling anything but peace. Suddenly, they are all doubters. Questioning their calling to continue Jesus' teachings and ministry.

That is, until Jesus appears. The gospel makes it a point to say that the room was locked and yet Christ is able to come into the room and greet them by saying, "Peace be with you." He greets them this way to calm their fears and ease their worry. He greets them with a blessing that is beyond anything the world has to offer; it is real and it is present. He offers it to the disciples like a warm blanket, a balm for their tormented souls.

His greeting offered encouragement that God's peace would be with them always. It was the permission the disciples needed to look forward and start using the lessons they learned from Christ to better their world.

Jesus came to command them to make followers and believers across the world of both Jews and Gentiles. "Again, Jesus said, Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Known as the great commissioning, Jesus is sending them forth into the world to heal its brokenness.

These 11 disciples have now become evangelists with a focus on recruiting more followers to join them. They will preach far and wide, establish churches in the region and share the love and peace of Jesus wherever they go.

The blessing "Peace be with you" creates in us a deep human longing for peace, a true and lasting peace. Not too long ago, I was seeking God's peace. I had been in a job for 6 years where I was bullied and berated.

Depressed and discouraged, I turned to a place that I had not been in many years. Hoping no one would recognize my saddened spirit, I returned to church. My first hint of hope came in the phrase, "the Lord be with you." The next was sharing the sign of peace. I heard, "Peace be with you", and the divine grace that I sought was granted to me by a woman sitting next to me in the pew.

A profound peace passed over me beyond my limited understanding. How could this woman have known that at that moment, those were the words that I needed to hear? That uncomplicated phrase can heal what is broken. It helped me to look forward with hope instead of backwards.

John's gospel this morning highlights the disbelief of Thomas. Thomas wasn't present for Jesus' appearance to the disciples and hearing about it from the others has led Thomas to be skeptical. Thomas needs proof beyond a reasonable doubt, and he will only accept what he sees with his own eyes.

I wonder if Thomas really doubts that it is Jesus who appeared to his friends and brothers instead, he may doubt himself. He may want so much to believe it is the Messiah, but he is afraid that he will be wrong. His heart is torn between wanting Christ's appearance to be true, just as Jesus had promised and trying to process Jesus' death this weekend.

All of Jesus' teaching, Thomas took to heart. He heard every word especially the story about how after 3 days Jesus would rise from the dead. Thomas asks himself, "How could that be?" A week later, again in a closed room with Thomas there this time, Jesus comes and says, "Peace be with you." He is soothing Thomas' spirit and washing away his fears. Thomas' need for peace and a simple demonstration from Christ is all Thomas' spirit needs to be healed.

The phrase "Peace be with you" spoken by Jesus appears only 3 times in the Bible. But there are other instances when Jesus speaks of peace to the disciples. In the gospel of John, Jesus twice reassures them. He says "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.

Later in the same gospel, Jesus tells the disciples, "The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage, I have conquered the world!"

There was only one of the 12 disciples present at the crucifixion of Jesus, as he said, the others had all fled. But they didn't stay home instead they gathered to weep and to mourn in the locked room.

When Jesus came and blessed them with peace, He breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any they are retained. Jesus granted them peace for their new journey.

John's gospel tells of the power that Jesus wielded by just using an old Jewish blessing. That blessing is still in use today as the greeting 'Shalom.'

In Hebrew, Shalom has many different meanings. It is a blessing for your coming and your going. It could mean to make things right or to make something whole or restore to wholeness.

This restoration is what Jesus brought to the frightened disciples. This was Christ's peace which he freely gave to his disciples. He soothed body, mind and spirit from the agitation that was interfering with their ability to carry on spreading Jesus' message without him.

Peace be with you. A simple phrase with limitless power. The power to overcome fear and worry. The power to meet disbelief and comfort the questioner. The power to grant courage and encourage us to do what is necessary in this world.

Jesus' appearance in that locked room and his patient demonstration to Thomas, so that all may believe, gave us all of the proof of Christ's resurrection that we will ever need.

Our hearts search for the promise of peace from Christ. When we find it, we are overwhelmed with its depth and power. Jesus blessed the disciples with peace when their hearts were most troubled and gave them rest in the Risen Christ.

When Christ appeared to the disciples, he still bore the wounds of our sins, but he returned, to prove he loved us. Christ will come again in glory and will conquer the world once again with a simple message of peace.

