

“Peace Be with You”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020
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Holy Scriptures: John 20:19-29

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.”

Will you pray with me?

*Gracious and Loving God,
thank you.*

*“Taking our sin, our cross, our shame
Rising again we bless your name
You are our all in all*

*When we fall down you pick us up
When we are dry You fill our cup
You are our all in all
Jesus Lamb of God worthy is Your name.” (Daniel Jernigan)*

*May the words from my lips and the meditations of our hearts
be worthy of Your name. Amen.*

One fine day there’s a knock on the gate into Heaven.

St. Peter looks out and sees a beautiful soul waiting there.
St. Peter is about to welcome her to heaven when she suddenly disappears.
A short time later there is another knock.
St. Peter opens the gate and sees the same soul.
Again, just as he is about to welcome her, she begins to fade away.
“Wait a minute!” said St. Peter. “Are you playing games with me?”
“Nooooo!” her distant voice replies. “I’m in a hospital and they keep resuscitating me!”
True story.

As Christians, we can laugh at death.
For us, death is not the joyless end of our lives.
Death is the beginning of endless joy.
Our final exit here will be our grandest entrance there. (Barbara Johnson, pp. 93-94)
My friends, live in confidence of the salvation that awaits us all.
With this confidence, live fully and completely in the moment.

“Peace Be with You”

Our last breath on earth is followed immediately by our first breath in heaven.
The Good News, my friends, is that if the amazing grace of God is true,
 then death does not get the privilege of the last word.
If the amazing grace of God is true,
 then whatever binds or holds us back or down or apart is overcome by love.
If the amazing grace of God is true,
 then all will be saved.

On this blessed day in this holy space
 our presence and prayers proclaim the joy-filled Truth:
Your mother who passed away *lives again*.
Your grandmother who passed away *lives again*.
Likewise, your father who died *lives again*.
Your son, your daughter, your sister, your brother
 whose burial you witnessed *lives again*.
Your beloved kinfolks, your friends, your neighbors near and far,
 and the great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before us *live again*.

The Good Lord is constantly at work and play on behalf of the whole people of God,
 breaking chains that bind,
 forgiving confessed sins,
 making a way for justice,
 mending bodies and healing souls,
 building bridges of reconciliation,
 rolling away stones,
 bringing heaven on earth,

and showing us the way home.

Jesus said, "Peace Be with You"

Was there ever a more on-target Word of God for such a time as this?

"Peace Be with You"

The Gospel of John testifies:

*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."
After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.
Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.
Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you.
As the [Creator] has sent me, so I send you."
When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
"Receive the Holy Spirit.
If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.
If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

Disciples of Christ need this word.

Jesus' disciples were in fear behind closed doors.

They were in hiding from the Jewish authorities.

Focus your energy not on their fear of the authorities

so much as the fact that when Jesus appeared before them
the door was physically closed and locked.

He entered and said, "Peace be with you"

There is nowhere you can go where God cannot find you.

You can be homebound, alone, isolated, praying,
and Jesus will come to you.

You can be locked up in a prison cell, praying in total isolation,
and Jesus will come to you.

You may be praying in a hospital, a funeral home chapel,
a freshly painted baby nursery.

You may be praying in a city of thousands, millions, sheltered in space,
and Jesus will come to you.

Nothing can separate Christ from His beloved, and you are loved by God.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans a list of whatever he could think of, saying:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

*Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or peril or sword?...
No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels,
nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Into a locked room with its disciples and quota of fear and apprehension and trauma,
Jesus entered, saying, **"Peace Be with You"**

Rather than feeding the fear, Jesus fed their faith.
He showed them the holes in his feet and hands and side,
showed them he was alive and at work in the world,
showed them the power of God's resurrection
is with us daily, in the everyday.

Professor Paul Tillich pointed out that the word "resurrection"
is not a clean translation from the Aramaic,
which is the language Jesus spoke.
Tillich said we ought to talk about the "new being."

The new being is that,
out of something which is distorted and bent, strained and bruised,
God can fashion something new and wonderful.

This is the most powerful theme of the Bible, and the core of our Christian faith.
The idea of the resurrection, of becoming a new being,
is that no matter the circumstances God can take the old and make a new you.
God can bring to life that which has died.
God can bring to new life that which has died to sin.
God can bring to new life in the community of faith that which has been lost.
Redemption in Jesus Christ is available to anyone, anytime, anywhere.
New life in the Spirit of God is an ongoing gift of grace.
Resurrection happens all the time, in us and through us, an ongoing gift of grace.

"Peace Be with You"

In effect, Christ said to the disciples,
here is God's presence, God's peace, God's promise.
Now, disciples, you choose.

You are being offered God's version of a new normal.
You have the power to choose what to do with this gift.
You have the power to pardon, to forgive, to let go,

to say I'm sorry and to receive repentance.

Reminds me of the day a woman bought a parrot for a pet.
All the parrot did was treat her badly, biting when she picked it up, insulting her,
and, when company dropped in, using foul language (pun intended).
One day she got so fed up with the parrot
that she opened the freezer, threw him in, and closed the door.
From inside, the parrot could be heard going on and on and on.
Then it got quiet.
She thought, "*Oh no, I killed it!*"
She opened the door, and the parrot just looked at her.
She picked it up.
Then the parrot said, "*I'm very sorry.*
I apologize for my bad behavior and bad language.
I promise you from now on I will be a respectful, obedient parrot."
"Well, okay," she said. "*Apology accepted.*"
"Thank you," said the parrot. "*Can I ask you something?*"
"Yes. What?"
The parrot looked over at the freezer. "*What did the chicken do?*"

"Peace Be with You"

"Resurrection is happening all around us," preached Bethany Apelquist.
"We live together in a resurrection-drenched world.
We live in a grace-drenched world."

We receive the love of a resurrection-drenched world
as neighbors make masks and face guards
and look out for each other,
feeding the hungry and serving to address food scarcity.
We are reminded we live in a grace-drenched world as Spain, China, Cameron,
the USA, and every sister nation around Mother Earth
affirm we have more in common than we dared imagine:
we hurt, we grieve, we are traumatized;
we are resilient, we are strong, we have this hope.

We welcome into a grace-drenched world God's liberation
when we speak truth to power
and call for the millions of suddenly unemployed folks
to be included in the Affordable Care Act;

We make resurrection-drenching have some skin on it
because we have the Easter audacity
to expect justice at the gate and mercy from our leaders,

saying release our children in cages – you are not forgotten --
& reunite parents separated from their loved ones.

May Christ enter into the cells and isolation wards
where incarcerated men and women are being infected with coronavirus
and say, “Peace be with you” & may they/we find healing & hope as well.

As bad and as awful and as debilitating as this pandemic is,
we are being offered a choice of weapons, if you will.
Will we move forward with the new skills and ideas and insights for community life,
for new priorities, for setting aside dependence on consumerism
and take up a new-found appreciation for relationships,
or will we chose to stay locked away, in fear, in despair?
As new beings in Christ, dare we choose hope?

Robert Kennedy embodied this hope for God’s new normal when he said,
*“It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief
that human history is shaped.*

*Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal,
or acts to improve the lot of others,
or strikes out against injustice,
he [or she] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.”*

I’m all in.

Give your life to God; send forth ripples of hope; great and small, each is significant.

Live in confidence of the salvation that awaits us all.

With this confidence, we live fully and completely in the moment.

Let us not arrive at death’s door

all prim and proper in a pretty and well-preserved body.

Instead we ought to arrive breathlessly,

skidding broadside through the pearly gates,

thoroughly used up, totally worn out,

loudly proclaiming, *“Wow! What a ride!”*

All power to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.