

Peace Be With You!

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, April 16, 2023.

John 20:19-31

Whenever I read this passage, my attention is drawn to Thomas, the disciple who has become known as “doubting Thomas,” because of his initial skepticism about the reports that Jesus had risen. I’ve always been attracted to Thomas, because he demands the very proof that I long for. He wants to see Jesus with his own eyes. He wants to touch him with his own hands. He wants to know that the resurrection is real. In this sense, Thomas is a surrogate for all of us who long for tangible proof, who want to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus Christ is risen.

Of course, the whole reason the gospel of John was written was so that we (the readers) might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we might have life in his name.

But there’s something else going on in this passage that’s curious. Did you notice that the writer of this gospel has Jesus saying “peace be with you” to the disciples not once but three times! Granted, the phrase was a common Jewish greeting in Jesus’ day. But its repetition in this brief passage seems significant, especially when you realize that the phrase appears nowhere else in John’s gospel and in only one other place in the other gospels – in one of Luke’s accounts of the resurrection.

I started to wonder why it was so important for the risen Jesus to be saying “peace be with you” to the disciples three times in the span of just eight verses? What was going on among the disciples in that room, behind closed doors, when Jesus suddenly showed up? Could it be that Jesus found the disciples arguing – fighting among themselves -- and so he intervened?

I can imagine that tensions might have been high in that room on Easter Sunday evening. The disciples were meeting in a house with

the doors locked, because they were afraid of the authorities. It is understandable that they were in hiding. After all, Jesus, the leader of their movement, had just been executed – crucified -- three days before. They must have been frightened for their lives, wondering whether they would be next to be arrested and executed. They also must have been deeply disappointed. They had put all their hopes in Jesus and now their hopes had been dashed. They had left their homes, their families, and their jobs to follow Jesus. They had spent three years of their lives as his disciples. And now he was dead. They must have been filled with despair. What were they going to do now?

With the high level of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty in that room, is it possible that the disciples turned on one other? Could their relationships have degenerated into accusations, backbiting, and one-upmanship? Might there have been arguments about whether to go home and return to their old lives or somehow try to continue the movement Jesus had started? Might there have been disagreements over who should succeed Jesus as the leader of the group? Who had been most loyal to Jesus? Who had been closest to him?

I can imagine the sons of Zebedee trying to decide whether they should go back home and rejoin the family fishing business. Would their father take them back?

I can imagine Simon Peter trying to assert leadership over the group: "I've been the spokesperson for our group all along. I'm clearly the one who should take charge now that Jesus is gone."

I can see him being interrupted by the beloved disciple: "I don't think so, Peter. I was with you when Jesus was being questioned. I got you into the courtyard of the high priest! Remember? Three times people asked you if you were one of Jesus' disciples, and three times you denied it! You betrayed him, just like he said you would. You have no business leading us! I knew Jesus far better than you. And believe me, Peter, you're no Jesus!"

I imagine Simon the Zealot chiming in: "Neither of you get it, do you!" "We're up against the brutal might of the Roman Empire! We've got to take up arms and defend ourselves! Jesus may have taught us to love and forgive, but see where that's gotten us? Jesus is dead and we're in hiding."

“No, no, no!” another disciple screams, “That’s the last thing Jesus would want us to do!”

Is it possible that the risen Jesus appeared in the midst of just such a heated argument among the disciples? Is it possible that his words “peace be with you” were meant as intervention in a conflict? “Peace! Stop fighting among yourselves!”

John tells us that after Jesus said this, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side, and the disciples rejoiced when they saw him. All of a sudden, the conflicts between them were moot. Jesus was alive! He was back! The fear and anxiety that they had been feeling turned to celebration. But there was little time for them to bask in the glow of Jesus’ presence. There was work to do!

Jesus said to them a second time, “Peace be with you,” and added “As God has sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathed on them the gift of the Holy Spirit. For Jesus, peace was not simply the absence of conflict. It also meant the presence of social and economic justice, of wholeness and health, prosperity and security, for the whole human family and all of God’s creation. For Jesus, peace was not a state of passivity. On the contrary, peace was something to be actively pursued, sought after, worked for, created. It was a mission from God, to which Jesus’ disciples were now called and commissioned. It was not enough for the disciples to be at peace with one another or to enjoy the inner serenity of personal peace. They needed to become peacemakers in the world. They needed to venture outside the walls of that locked house and be agents of peace and reconciliation in a world of violence, injustice, and oppression. “As God has sent me,” Jesus said, “so I send you.”

A week later, when Thomas was with them, Jesus came to the disciples again, and for a third time Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you.” Then he turned to Thomas and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Jesus did not rebuke Thomas for his disbelief, for his skepticism. Rather, Jesus gave Thomas what he had asked for. He stood before Thomas and invited him to touch his wounded body. Thomas responded immediately with the declaration of faith: “My Lord and my God!” He realized that the stories he had heard were

true – Jesus Christ had risen! In that moment, Thomas, too, moved from doubt to faith.

The story ends with the words of Jesus, which seem to be directed at us as much as to Thomas and the disciples: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have come to believe!

“Peace be with you,” Jesus says to us. “Have confidence in your faith, for I am with you.” Jesus’ brings us peace and sends us out to bring peace to others. Jesus challenges us to be a community of peacemakers, to be at peace within ourselves, to live in peace with one another, and to foster peace in the wider world.

Each Sunday, we engage in a ritual that is intended to remind us of our call to peacemaking. We greet one another with a sign of Christ’s peace (a wave, a handshake, or a hug). “The peace of Christ be with you,” we say. “And also with you.” This ritual goes back to the practices of the early church in the first century. We know this because in Paul’s letters there are several references to greeting one another with “a holy kiss.” Over time the actual kiss of peace has given way to either a handshake or an embrace.

It is an act of hospitality to greet one another with the peace of Christ. In doing so, we earnestly desire peace for the persons we are greeting. But on a deeper level, its purpose is to visibly demonstrate our oneness in Christ, to show that we are members of the one body of Christ and that nothing stands in the way of our unity. Because we have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, we therefore are also reconciled with one another.

So, every time we pass the peace, may we be reminded of Christ’s abiding presence with us and the peace that Christ brings us. May we also remember Christ’s challenge to us to be a community of peacemakers, to be at peace within ourselves, to live in peace with one another, and to foster peace in the wider world. And may we respond to that challenge by venturing out beyond the walls of this church sanctuary, in faith and confidence, to be God’s agents of peace and reconciliation in the world. Amen.