

Second Sunday of Easter (April 19, 2020)

Text: John 20:19-31

“God’s Gift of Peace”

Just before He entered into Jerusalem, Jesus wept over Jerusalem: ***“Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!”*** Today we hear the Risen Christ stand among His disciples and announce: ***“Peace be with you.”***

Those disciples were anything but peace-filled. They were locked up in a room (not at all clear that it was the same room used for the Last Supper, but tradition says so) “for fear of the Jews” John says.

Being afraid cannot lead to peace. As Harry Emerson Fosdick put it:

Fear imprisons, faith Liberates;
Fear paralyzes, faith empowers;
Fear disheartens, faith encourages;
Fear sickens, faith heals;
Fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable;
Fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith rejoices in its God.

The disciples had good reason (they thought) to fear: their master had been executed; who was bound to be next? Why they hung around Jerusalem under those circumstances is a matter for discussion. I think I might have hightailed it back to Galilee. But for some reason they stay. Was it because they knew, without knowing they knew, that Jesus had something yet to give them? Was this the Spirit’s work? I think so.

So there they were, not knowing the things that make for peace. And Jesus says to them: ***“Peace be with you.”***

Shalom ("peace" in Hebrew) means that God is working in the world. When God works, he puts the world in balance. No war, no hatred, no cynicism could overcome God's providence. When God works, he puts the spirit in balance. No fear, no doubt, no lack of trust could overcome the sheer joy of God's presence. Shalom means everything is right in God's world.

When his followers saw Jesus alive with his deadly wounds, they realized the "Shalom" of Jesus, for they witnessed God's activity in the world. Fear left them, for now they believed. Joy entered their hearts.

Again Jesus said "*Shalom*," only this time with a command and a gift. The command: Go into the world. As the Father send Jesus into the physical world, Jesus would now send his followers into the cultural world. With the command came the gift: the Holy Spirit. In Greek (pneuma) and in Hebrew (ruach), the word "spirit" can be translated as "breath." The word "breathe on" in Greek can be seen only in these verses from John and in Genesis 2:7 of the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament used by the early Church) where God breathed life into Adam.

So, when Jesus breathed on his followers, he gave them his Spirit. When the followers took in the Spirit, they received his newly risen life. Now they could obey the missionary command to proclaim repentance and forgive sin. Jesus told his followers to forgive or retain sin like a knot loosening or tied closely together. If the followers forgive, however, they must loosen the sinner from the guilt now and in the future. Sin was never to be brought up again. That's peace!

But then there is Thomas. There is always a Thomas. Thomas misses out on the peace blessing from Jesus. The new life of Jesus' resurrection has not yet begun in him. So he doubts (or so we have come to say of him).

Paul Tillich wrote: "*Doubt is not the opposite of faith but an element of faith.*" But doubt is also an element of fear, and as long as doubt persists, peace cannot be ours.

Here's the problem: Thomas insisted, "***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.***" Not "*I cannot believe . . .*" but "***I will not believe.***"

In his book, Will and Spirit, Gerald May marks a distinction between willfulness and willingness. ". . . *willingness implies a surrendering of*

one's self-separateness, and entering-into, and immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. . . willfulness is the setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate existence. More simply, willingness is saying yes to the mystery of being alive in each moment. Willfulness is saying no, or perhaps more commonly, 'Yes, but . . .'"

Thomas is being willful here *"I will not believe;"* or maybe better translated in this instance: *"I will not to believe."* Most of us, at some point or other in our lives, are, or continue to be, willful.

It is not that Thomas doubts— [the term "doubt" (δισταζο diatazo) never comes into this narrative; John nowhere uses the word — the NIV translation is wrong: Jesus literally says, *"do not become faithless (απιστος) but faithful (πιστος)."* and, we may add: stop being willful and become willing] — it is that he refuses to believe.

Insofar as we also act willfully, we lose out on God's peace. Because we essentially say *"No!"* to the gift of peace. *"I don't need it."* *"I can take care of myself."* *"There is too much demanded of me here, so I say 'No!'"*

What we fail to realize is what Thomas was really asking for was to be convinced to become willing. Let me see if I can paraphrase Thomas' point: *"You disciples got to see something that I haven't yet seen. Moreover, you got a breathing that I didn't get. It is unfair, therefore, for you to expect me to respond in the same manner and with the same enthusiasm that you are showing. I haven't been as blessed as you. Maybe, I'm not as spiritual as you. So unless and until I can get to the place where you are now, I'm stuck with this same old Thomas that there's always been, and there is no hope of change."*

I have met hundreds of Christians whose lives are testimony to that point of view. The new life that Christ imparts is seen as a distant prize, not a present gift. They want to believe (they say); but in essence they argue they will not, because believing will demand too much: too much change

in the way they live; too much sacrifice (all that taking up the cross, etc); too much time; too much of me may become lost. That's willfulness . . . and there is no peace, only constant struggle to be found there.

But I have also met several dozens of Christians who have embraced the peace that Jesus gives.

I need to point out something here: On the first appearance, Jesus breathes on the disciples and proclaims peace. Thomas is not there. When Thomas is there, no breath dispensation happens. What are we to make of this?

Brian Stoffregen writes: *“Thomas should have believed the word from the other disciples: ‘We have seen the Lord’. Similarly the other disciples should have believed the word from Mary: ‘I have seen the Lord.’ The fact that they were still behind locked doors because they feared the Jews indicates that if they had believed the word, it didn't make any difference in their lives.”*

In other words, while Thomas did not receive the direct “ruach” from Jesus, the Spirit was still at work, as He is at work here today, through the word. [We may also make something of the fact that these events happen eight days apart — what was Jesus doing in between time? What were the disciples doing?

Many scholars believe that John makes a point about the eight-day elapsed time to emphasize what had become an early practice of the Christian community, gathering around the Eucharist every Sunday — is this (I think so) an emphasis not only on Word but also on Sacrament? Was John that Lutheran?]

While doubting does not destroy faith (it is, in fact, how faith gets tested and affirmed), it does rob us of peace. We cannot embrace the fullness of God's actions when we doubt, especially when that doubting is willful.

Here is why: Willfulness refuses to let God be in control. Willfulness refuses to give God all glory. Willfulness refuses to surrender the self to

God's purposes. If left unchecked, willfulness becomes unbelief — not doubt (δισταζο which literally means “standing apart”) but unfaith (απιστος) which is where Thomas was and was in danger of staying.

Jesus comes to us today. Like Thomas on that first appearance, we do not get to see Him, to experience Him directly. We are told of Him (I almost said, “*We are only told of Him.*” which would obviate the point). We are told of Him; tThat is enough for faith.

If we embrace that message of His resurrection life, His Spirit comes upon us — the life-giving Spirit, the power-providing Spirit; the gift-endowing Spirit; the peace-dispensing Spirit.

The gift of peace is ours . . . as is the command to now go and bring that peace to others as we speak that Word that proclaims forgiveness of sins. Christ is risen!

We now get to live as if that is true!

Amen.