

“Resurrection Life: Jesus Gives Us Peace, With a Purpose”

Psalm 6:1, 5-11; John 20:19-31

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, Jr.

You know, it’s hard to imagine a passage of scripture more suited to our present circumstances than the one we have today. Here we are, at our fifth week of worshipping by video conference, locked away in our homes out of justifiable concern over the virus that stalks the land; and here is the lectionary reading for the Second Sunday of Easter that begins with the fearful disciples in a room behind locked doors, waiting to hear some good news. Can we relate to that? Oh, yes, yes we can. This is one of the ways the Bible can speak to us in the reality of our own experiences.

Well, the reality for the disciples of Jesus depicted in this morning’s lesson, has them gathered together in a house on the evening of the first day of the week, the third day after the Crucifixion of Jesus.

- They’ve already heard the report of Mary’s discovery of the empty tomb, and of how Peter and John ran to the tomb, finding it just as Mary said.
- They’ve also heard Mary’s report, about how she stayed at the tomb after Peter and John left, how she met a man she thought was the gardener, and when he spoke her name, she immediately recognized him as Jesus.
- They’ve heard how Jesus told her to go tell the disciples what she had seen, and what Jesus said—that he would soon ascend to God the Father.

The day has passed, and the sun’s gone down. Now they are all together—except for Thomas—in a room, in a house, behind a locked door, for fear the Jewish religious authorities might come after them. Without warning, Jesus appeared in their midst. They must have been shocked by the sudden appearance of Jesus.

But then, Jesus spoke: “Peace be with you.” And when he showed them his pierced hands and his side, the disciples rejoiced. They believed what they saw. They celebrated because their Master and friend, the one who was dead, was somehow alive! Joy filled that house that night! Do you wonder what that joy was like?

It’s hard to get an exact feel for it. The closest parallel I can think of is one of those stories you see on TV from time to time when a soldier, sailor or marine returns home early from an overseas deployment, and surprises his or her family. It usually goes something like this: The unsuspecting family are at a school event like a concert or awards ceremony, they get called up to receive recognition, and who should walk out on stage but their loved one. The excitement and the joy and the tears are genuine, for one who was so far away is here; the Mom or Dad, sister or brother they remembered from when they were together; the absent one is present with them, in the flesh. So it was for the disciples of Jesus. The one they loved was dead...he was becoming a memory...now he is with them again.

A little later, Thomas showed up and heard them excitedly explain that they had seen Jesus. Naturally, he didn’t believe them. Naturally, he insisted on seeing for himself. And when Jesus appeared a week later, he showed Thomas the scars. “Do not doubt, only believe,” Jesus told him. And Thomas believed and confessed “My Lord and my God.”

Before we go any further, I wonder if we can do something this morning. Can we cut Thomas some slack?¹ Thomas is remembered best in this story as the one who doubted. Now I know there’s a sound theological reason for treating Thomas this way. Thomas had to see in order to believe, and he was blessed by this. But Jesus went on to say: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” That leaves room

¹ Joy J. Moore, “Commentary on John 20:19-31,” *Working Preacher.Org*, April 19, 2020, article on internet, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4434, accessed 16 April 2020.

for everyone since the first disciples, people like you and me, to be blessed and believe, even if they didn't see Jesus themselves.

So, I think Thomas gets a bad rap for failing to believe when his fellow disciples told him Jesus was alive. And this is why...the same was also true for Mary and the disciples. They didn't believe until they saw.

- Mary saw the open tomb but didn't believe Jesus was alive until she saw him herself.
- The disciples locked in their room didn't believe what Mary said...it was only when Jesus appeared to them that they started to rejoice.

My point here is that singling out Thomas and giving him the reputation as "Doubting Thomas" is undeserved. Was it his fault he missed out on the first appearances to Mary and to the other disciples? Thomas just wanted to have the same experience of the Risen Christ as his fellow disciples. And Jesus was gracious enough to meet his need. None of the disciples believed until they saw the Risen Christ. Instead of "Doubting Thomas," I think we'd be better off—and more accurate—by calling them all "Doubting Disciples."

So, Jesus is alive! He's raised from the dead! He's entered into new life and invited us to come along for the ride! In those first appearances, Jesus gave his disciples a wonderful gift. The gift of his presence was one gift—a reminder that even locked doors can't stop God from showing up. Also...**When Jesus showed up, he gave his disciples peace with a purpose.**

Peace. Jesus' first words to the disciples were: "Peace be with you." He said it three times in this passage: two times to the 10 disciples, and to all 11, when Thomas was present. When Jesus said "peace," he was fulfilling a promise he'd made at the Last Supper. From John 14 we read:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Now if this sounds familiar, it should. We hear this passage from John 14 spoken most often at funerals to remind us of God's comfort in times of grief.

The peace that Jesus brings in John 20 comes from the One God raised up from the grave. Despite the harm inflicted on him by the world, the first thing Jesus gives to the disciples is peace. It comes as a word of grace. It comes through doors locked by fear. It comes as a living presence—Jesus himself stands in the midst of his disciples to bring them peace.²

This gift of peace is the gift of *shalom*, the Hebrew word we translate as peace. We usually think of peace simply as the absence of conflict, but *Shalom* is far more than that. We often speak in the church of healing and wholeness.

- Healing, having all that is broken within us repaired and restored.
- Wholeness, being made complete, having all we need—not all we want—but becoming the whole human beings God intends for us to become. As John Wesley might have put it, wholeness would be becoming perfect in love toward God and one another.

Shalom encompasses these notions as well—one who has *shalom* is healed, restored, and one who has *shalom* is whole, lacking in nothing. Saying *shalom* to someone means you wish them all that is good and fulfilling in life. When *shalom* is offered as a greeting—as it is here by Jesus—it is considered a prayer.³ How about that! The first words Jesus spoke to his disciples is a prayer for them to be healed and restored. When Jesus gives us the *shalom* of God, he gives us all that God desires for us to have. What a wonderful gift, this peace from God, in their time and in ours.

The mission. Along with his peace, Jesus gives the disciples a mission:

² D. Cameron Murchison, "John 20:19-31, Theological Perspective," in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 396.

³ *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2016), fn, 20:19, 1855.

- “As the Father has sent me, so I send you...” The mission for the disciples is to go into the world to share the peace and the joy they have received from Jesus. As Jesus was sent to bring new life, so the disciples—all the disciples of Jesus—are sent on this same mission: To offer new life by believing in the Resurrected Son of God.
- Jesus breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” When Jesus breathed on the disciples, he was pointing to God as the source of life in the world. The Spirit empowers the mission; the Spirit is God’s living presence with us; the Spirit is life. The symbolism of the breath reminds us of:
 - o The breath of God from the beginning, in Genesis 2:7, when God breathed life into humankind.
 - o And the breath of life that restored Israel from the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37.
 Breathing on the disciples confers new life; and with this new life, forgiveness.
- “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Forgiveness is tied up with the mission and the peace of God.
 - o Through Jesus, God forgives our sins. We are to do the same.
 - o Forgiving sins releases us from carrying the grudges, the anger, the hurts that are destructive of *shalom*. There is no peace for us, no wholeness, no living without fear, unless we forgive.
 - o Forgiveness is key to our life with God and with others. “Forgive us our trespasses,” we pray, “as we forgive those who trespass against us.”... “As we forgive...” What’s implied here is if we don’t forgive others, then our trespasses, our sins, won’t be forgiven either.
 - o Here is the necessary prescription for true peace: We need to be **forgiving** people, in order to be **forgiven** people.

When Jesus showed up, he gave his disciples peace with a purpose. He still does that today.

I want to close with a story about a small “r” resurrection that shows how God brings new life, even today. It comes from Will Willimon, a former United Methodist Bishop and prolific writer:

We were having a discussion of “difficult Christian beliefs.” In due time, someone mentioned the difficulty of believing in the bodily resurrection of Christ. Many found this a rather farfetched possibility. Life from death? A dead body risen from the tomb? How can that be credible?

A woman spoke up, “Well, I do believe in the resurrection. I’ve seen it. I’ve lived it. When my husband walked out on me, I could have died. I did die. My life was over. Dead end.

“But then, by the grace of God, and with the coaxing of good friends, I came back. I came to life. I got a whole new life. It was a miracle. “I believe in the resurrection. I’ve lived it.”⁴

I believe in resurrection too. I believe in the “capital ‘R’” Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s mighty act that gave Jesus new life, and brings us new life too. I also believe in the “small ‘r’” resurrections God works in the middle of our lives. I believe that because I believe God still shows up. God shows up...when we cannot see a way forward...when all the options are gone...when the door is closed and locked from the inside...God still shows up. Through the Resurrection, **Jesus gives us peace, with a purpose.**

- The peace Jesus gives both comforts us and allays our fears. It is the assurance that the Spirit of God is with us.
- The peace Jesus gives us is not ours to keep—we are to offer it, freely, to others.
- The peace Jesus gives us is tied to forgiveness. It must be because without forgiveness, there is no *shalom*. But with forgiveness, we are made whole in our relationship with God, and with one another.

That is today’s Good News. Jesus gives us Resurrection life. Let us live this Resurrection life day by day as we walk with Jesus. “Peace be with you.” Amen.

⁴ Will Willimon, *Will Willimon’s Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year A, Part 1*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 260.