

Sermon + Second Sunday of Easter, John 20:19-31
April 19, 2020
For Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Alleluia. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.

The holy gospel according to John. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

¹⁹When 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.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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.” ²⁶A 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.” ²⁷Then 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.”

²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Listen again to how this passage from John’s Gospel begins: “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....”

I love John’s Gospel, but I am deeply troubled by the numerous polemical references to the Jews throughout John. Sadly, tragically, this Gospel has been used throughout the centuries to advance the scourge of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

Concerning the intended meaning of this verse, it might be more accurate to say that the disciples feared the religious leaders and authorities, not all Jewish people. In fact, the disciples were themselves Jews.

So, having stated my concerns upfront, let's set aside the references to the Jews, for whom God's covenant promises are irrevocable according to the Apostle Paul, and redact the verse so that we can discern meanings for us in our own day.

Listen to how the verse reads now with a slight, but profound edit: "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..."

That changes it quite a lot doesn't it. "The doors of the house... were locked for fear..."

Let's pause for a moment so that you can become aware of what you may be afraid of. What are your fears right now, even as you watch and listen?

Pause for quiet reflection.

There's a lot of fear in the world, especially now as the coronavirus wreaks havoc with people's health, kills so many thousands, causes mass unemployment, locks down whole economies and societies, and on and on. Covid-19 has turned the world upside down in profoundly scary ways.

By now, you have in mind what you're afraid of. Fear is all around. I don't need to belabor the point.

And the doors of our houses are locked. Often literally. Sometimes with extra security systems in place. Perhaps as significantly, the doors of our hearts and minds are locked metaphorically, locked in place by fear, as much of the whole world seeks to shelter at home in social isolation.

Here we are in circumstances day after day, week after week, in this global lockdown, cut off from each other in ways that often perpetuate and deepen our fears.

Now that you have a better sense of what you're feeling and experiencing, listen to this: "When...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear..., Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"

“Jesus came and stood among them.” How did he manage to get into the house where the disciples were? I don’t know. But Jesus entered the room, the dwelling place, through locked doors. Jesus entered into fear. Jesus stood among them: “Peace,” he said.

Consider this: Jesus didn’t knock on the door to be let in. He didn’t offer any secret password. Moreover, when in the room, Jesus did not stand away from them. He did not stand over against them. Jesus did not appear as a voice within their individual hearts. No, Jesus managed to find his way through the locked doors and stood bodily among them, with them, close-by.

Take a moment to imagine this scene, and transport it in your mind’s eye through the centuries to your own places and circumstances. Imagine Jesus entering your own homes, where you happen to be right now, finding his way behind your locked doors – literally or metaphorically, again, the locked doors of your hearts, minds, circumstances, more. Imagine Jesus with you now.

Pause for quiet reflection.

Then hear Jesus’ words spoken directly to you, your circumstances, the particularities of your lives right now, your fears, your anxieties and uncertainties: “Peace be with you.” Peace. Peace. Peace be with **you**.

Remember, these are Jesus’ very own words ringing through the centuries to our own day, traveling the distance from ancient Palestine to contemporary North America.

Oh, how I miss sharing the Peace on Sunday mornings in our worshipping assemblies. In addition to the absence of the sacrament of Holy Communion, sharing the Peace is another crucial feature of our life together that is painfully absent right now.

For when we pass the Peace with each other on Sunday mornings, it is our re-enactment of Jesus standing among us. It is Christ’s Peace that we share with each other.

Which is why it has been so meaningful to me that every Sunday one of the faithful members of Resurrection Church emails out a greeting of Peace as a way of sharing Christ’s Peace, even if we cannot exchange it face to face right now. This has become a regular, beloved feature of our home worship life together. I thank God for this gesture!

There are at least a few more sermons that could be preached in response to today's gospel passage from John:

- There's Jesus showing his hands and side to confirm that the one standing among them is the same one who was crucified, who died and who had been raised by God.
- There's Jesus breathing on the disciples to send the Holy Spirit to inaugurate our ministry of forgiveness, of reconciliation – John's Pentecost event.
- Then there's so-called Doubting Thomas who gets bad press simply because he sought the same benefit that his other cohort disciples enjoyed, namely, seeing Jesus and his wounds that confirm his identity as the crucified and risen One.

Each of these moments in today's gospel passage could be its own sermon.

But enough. Let me leave you with the vision of Jesus entering our dwelling places despite the locked doors, despite the lockdown, despite the sheltering in place, despite the social distancing.

Though it's not his embodied presence right now, through Jesus' Word in today's Gospel, and the Holy Spirit that was breathed upon the disciples who is still speaking today in that Word, Jesus stands among us even now, right now, even where you happen to be dwelling.

The message is the same through the centuries: "Peace be with you."

As this sermon concludes, I encourage you to dwell with this experience, linger with it, that perhaps we can know a moment of Peace amidst the frightening upheaval of the global pandemic.

In the divine Peace that finds us, we may then be moved to exclaim with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!"

Here's to life in Jesus' name. Here's to Peace amidst fear behind locked doors. For Chris is risen. Chris is risen indeed. Alleluia.