

Easter 2A

John 20:19-31

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Good day! Peace be with you.

In today's Gospel, when I heard Jesus say, "Peace be with you.", I realized how long it has been since I have said those words to another person. Five weeks to be exact. Both hearing it and saying it again, reminded me of how central those four words, just like the Eucharistic feast, are to our Christian faith.

I am not a cradle Episcopalian. So, the first time someone reached out to me during the service and said, "Peace be with you.", I reacted like a startled cat. Just like I think those first disciples did the first time Jesus uttered those words. They were unexpected. It took time to fully understand the deeper meaning of those words.

"Peace be with you." The first words that Christ says to His disciples when He appears to all of them as they huddled together behind locked doors out of fear for their lives. They had three days to relive all that had transpired on the day when their lives went from joyful bliss to utter desolation in less than twenty-four hours. Three days to contemplate how things had gone so wrong, so fast. Three days to consider all the ways that they felt they had failed Jesus. Three days to think about how Jesus had left them alone to pick up the pieces of their lives and the movement that He had started.

I suspect the disciples spent some of that time thinking about what Jesus would say to them if He appeared to them again. Notice I said "if", not "when", for they only had Mary Magdalene's word of Christ's resurrection. Thomas wasn't the only disciple who doubted, but that is a sermon for another day. Of all the things that ran through their minds about what Jesus would say, "Peace be with you" was nowhere on the list.

Yet, peace is exactly what the disciples needed, whether they knew it or not. They were consumed by fear and grief. Uncertainty about their fate left them tense and on edge. Anxiety and despair were constant companions. Peace was the furthest thing from their minds. However, in four simple words, Jesus stole past their fears and spoke to their heart. In four simple words He reconciled with them, extended forgiveness for any wrongs they had committed whether real or imagined, and restored them to a right relationship with Christ.

These four simple words, "Peace be with you.", are a powerful restorative to wholeness and fullness of life. In our darkest hours, when despair threatens to overwhelm us and drag us into a pit from which we think we will never emerge, these four simple words are a lifeline to which we can cling. They are a light in the darkness and a reminder that the darkness was overcome by Christ as he rose from the grave.

“Peace be with you,” is a powerful phrase. Unfortunately, we often treat it as nothing more than a simple hello or goodbye. It means so much more than that. It has the power to heal that which is broken. The power to extend forgiveness and bring reconciliation without dredging up all the baggage that drags us down. The power to brighten someone’s day. The power to lift up their spirit, whether we realize it or not. When we say to someone, “Peace be with you,” we are extending the hand of hope just as Christ did to the disciples in the locked room.

In our tumultuous lives, peace seems like a rare commodity. Even more so as we hunker down behind locked doors during this COVID-19 pandemic. Sometimes, as followers of Christ, we believe we should be immune to the struggles of life. His earliest disciples certainly thought so. Finding themselves struggling to avoid the same fate that befell Jesus wasn’t what they signed up for when they dropped their nets on the shores of Galilee.

What those earliest disciples thought their life would be like is best summed up in the lyrics of the song “The Last Supper” from the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The apostles sing:

Look at all my trials and tribulations
Sinking in a gentle pool of wine
Don't disturb me now; I can see the answers
Till 'this evening' is 'this morning', life is fine
Always hoped that I'd be an apostle
Knew that I would make it if I tried
Then when we retire we can write the gospels
So they'll still talk about us when we've died

They had an idyllic view of what it meant to follow Christ. In their minds, their trials and tribulations were over, and life would be fine forever more. What they failed to realize, as do many followers of Christ, is that trials and tribulations are a normal part of living in a world that humans made imperfect through our own folly and vices. Being a follower of Christ doesn’t change that. What it does change is how we view the world, and how we live through the ups and downs of life. Jesus wasn’t immune to the ordinary struggles of life and neither are we. But Jesus shows us the way to deal with those struggles. He shows us the way of love. He teaches us that love overcomes hate and despair and darkness and all the hard times in life which we will encounter. As the theologian Frederick Buechner puts it, peace is “not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love.”

“Peace be with you” is a message of love. A message of hope. A message of reconciliation and forgiveness. These four simple words bring an inner calm in the chaos of life. They allow us to find peace within ourselves so that we can step out into the world and BE a beacon of peace in the world.

Being a beacon of peace, stepping out into the world- this is what Jesus calls us to do. As Jesus sent His first disciples out into the world to spread His message of love and peace, so too He sends us. As He breathed life into the disciples locked away from the perils of the world, so too He breathes life into us, filling us with the Holy Spirit and bringing an inner calm as we step out into a world that is in desperate need of the peace that Christ brings.

“Peace be with you.” Four simple words, straight from your heart to someone else’s, can change the world. Or at least your little part of it. Four simple words that allow you to BE the church, anytime and anywhere. Reach out to others, whether by phone, computer, letter, or for now, an appropriate six-foot distance. Enter into their presence and straight from your heart to theirs send four simple words- “Peace be with you.”

Amen.