

Sermon-First Sunday after Easter 23 April 2017
St. John 20:19-23 by the Rev. Dennis Washburn, Ph.D.

The Gospel today is rich in content. There is Christ's appearance to ten apostles, and His commissioning them to ministry. Each of these elements could be the theme of a variety of sermons. This morning, I would focus on the general meaning of the risen Lord's appearance to the apostles.

Even after the first reports of Jesus' Resurrection, the disciples remained fearful and timid. The risen Lord came to where they were locked in. He came to change them. He brought greetings in the common Jewish manner, saying "Peace be with you," in Hebrew shalom alechem. In the Bible, this greeting is always an implied prayer for God's peace.

The words of peace take on a special meaning in light of Christ's resurrection. When the risen Lord says, "peace be unto you," it is more than a general wish. It is specific blessing from the risen Lord. He is the embodiment of God's peace. Jesus Himself has established a new and lasting relationship with the heavenly Father for all who truly believe.

After Good Friday and Easter morning, peace was a special need for the disciples. During Holy Week, they did not distinguish themselves for valor, faithfulness, or insight. Now they are still fearful and need to hear His words of peace. They need His assurance that He has not returned to judge them for their weakness.

And yet, although the disciples really need to hear Christ's reassuring words, the risen Lord does not stop there. After greeting and comforting them, Jesus wishes them peace a second time, and this time, He adds a commission or a call to action. As the heavenly Father has sent Him, likewise Christ's sends the apostles and to an extent, His whole Church. Jesus shares His resurrection victory over sin and spiritual death with the apostles. Through His Gospel, He gives the apostles the authority to forgive human sins.

In His earthly ministry, Christ proclaimed a new and peaceful relationship between the Almighty and penitent, faithful sinners. Now through His cross and Resurrection, Christ has accomplished true peace. He returns to share such peace with the apostles. But the peace of Christ is not limited to the apostles alone. They are to share the message with others. Jesus the Christ is risen and alive, and His work in the world is to be continued.

The message of the risen Christ to the fearful disciples can be applied to the lives of modern believers in a number of ways. Today, let us emphasize two points. First, Christ's words of greeting remind us that peace is an important element of the Gospel. In Scripture, peace is a rich concept with many implications. Unfortunately, many people including Christians tend to have poor understandings of peace. All too often, the word "peace" is only understood as an absence of outward conflicts or disturbances. But in reality, that is only one aspect of peace.

The biblical view of peace is founded on the Hebrew word "shalom." Shalom has a variety of meanings. It can mean "wholeness," "totality," or "togetherness." In Scripture,

peace can refer to a lack of violence, to physical health, to material prosperity, and to spiritual well-being. It can refer to relationships between individuals and groups, to an individual's mental and spiritual condition, or to the relationship between God and a person or group.

For Christians, the Resurrection of Jesus is the high point of scriptural teachings about peace. Among believers, His resurrection may contribute to outward harmony. But more importantly, faith in the resurrected Christ offers penitent sinners peace with the heavenly Father. It removes our estrangement as fallen creatures from the holy God; it offers us the hope of eternal life in God's holy presence.

When we accept this divine peace, then we are also open to other aspects of peace. The conflicts between individuals, the struggles of political groups and nations, and even the temptations of evil appear in a new light because of Jesus' Resurrection. Life on earth still has its problems, its lacks of peace and tranquility, but believers also realize that the peace that comes from the risen Lord is greater than the turmoil and disorder of the fallen human condition.

Secondly, Christ's words to the disciples remind us that the peace of His Resurrection is not some personal or private possession. It is not a secret that we are to keep to ourselves. The risen Christ comes to His apostles in peace so that they can share the joy of His spiritual peace with others. He commissions them to share the peace brought by His victory over sin and death.

In the sacramental theology of the Church universal, we hold to the idea that ordained ministers have a special role in

sharing this peace. In public and private confession and absolution, bishops and priests, the pastors of Christ's flock, share the peace of reconciliation with God. They also share such peace in preaching and teaching the Gospel, and in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.

Yet, as important as the vocation of ordained ministry is, Christians must not stop there. For the risen Lord's commission to the apostles is also to the whole Body of Christ, to the entire membership of Christ's Church. Although there are differences in calling and function, all Christians are called to bear witness to the spiritual peace bestowed upon them by the risen Savior.

In word and deed, all believers ought to affirm that Jesus Christ has brought us spiritual peace through His Resurrection. The risen and living Lord has conquered sin and death; He keeps overcoming sin and death in our lives, and He is ready, able, and willing to overcome them in the lives of all who will have faith. In other words, through all of us as Christ's disciples, Christ still offers peace with God and our neighbors.

Some days, we may not feel very peaceful, but we need to focus more on what the risen Lord offers. By the ways that we order our lives and by the values that we give priority, all of us are called to witness to God's peace in Christ Jesus. By our reactions to daily problems, by showing consideration to the people around us, by inviting others to share in Christian faith and worship, we are to continue the work of our living and victorious Lord. Despite our personal weakness, despite our human failures, we can all become greater channels of Christ's grace and peace to the people we encounter.

To summarize: our selection from John 20 reminds us of two central points about the risen Christ. Jesus came to offer His followers a new and deeper peace with God and within themselves. And He expected His followers to share His peace with others. He still offers us such peace, and He asks us to share it in our lives, in our total witness to Him and His Gospel.

Now unto the God of grace and mercy who has bestowed upon us the peace of our risen Lord Jesus Christ, be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen