

Jim Vitale
4/19/20

Peace
Jn 20:19-31

Pr. Jim's Sermon
April 19, 2020
Second Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31

Peace be with you.

Our gospel story begins in the dark of the evening and, since we're reading from John's gospel, you already know what I'm going to say. The darkness signifies that the disciples don't fully understand what Jesus is doing.

Only three days ago Jesus was arrested, tried, and murdered. Early in the morning, on the day after the Sabbath, Mary went to the tomb, had her encounter with Jesus, and then ran to tell the other disciples what she saw. Despite her testimony, however, the disciples decide it would be best for them to hide out. And so, later that night, they head off to some discreet location and shut the door. They seal themselves as in a tomb.

What are they so afraid of?

Jesus' arrest, his trial, his flaying, his murder are all still very fresh for the disciples. They are hiding, we hear, "for fear of the Jews." Now, it is important that we understand this correctly; this line has been misunderstood and used as fodder for so much anti-Semitism. When John says "the Jews" here, he is not referring to every Jew; what he means is "the religious authorities." We can come away with the mistaken idea that all of Judea was roving mobs of bloodthirsty zealots on the hunt for Jesus' disciples. This was most certainly not the case. The only ones who would have cared at all were the Pharisees; the religious leaders; really, the pastors.

The disciples are essentially worried that they'll be identified with Jesus, that they'll be thrown out of the synagogues, beaten, or perhaps even crucified themselves. But is that all that troubles them? In the last three days, as far as they know, everything has fallen apart. This teacher whom they followed for three years, who taught them about God's love, about life and truth, who promised them a future, who seemed to be God's messiah, was suddenly ripped away from them. His profound new movement was crushed in an instant by the heel of Rome.

Perhaps the disciples aren't just afraid of persecution; perhaps they are afraid that everything Jesus told them was a lie, that all he promised would never come true. Their fear transcends bodily injury; they're afraid that they've lost everything.

I don't know about you, but I resonate with the disciples because I've got a lot of fear in my life today. I'm afraid of the current pandemic, not just of getting sick, but of the long-term economic fallout, the long-term effects of isolation, and the strong possibility that I've contributed to the spread of the disease because of my carelessness. I am most afraid, however, because this pandemic has shown me just how fragile our society is. It would take far

less than I imagined to strip us of peace and prosperity. If you've ever read Cormac McCarthy's catastrophic novel *The Road*, you know what I mean when I say it doesn't seem like such a stretch.

There are, of course, plenty of other things to be worried about: finances, health, employment, family dynamics, raising children, elections, weather. God makes a lot of promises to us in scripture and sometimes I wonder if they'll ever come true. We're a lot like the disciples, shutting ourselves in for fear of the world.

But the disciples learn that their locked door is not as secure as they thought it would be. Suddenly Jesus stands among them with pierced hands, feet, and side. And what does he say to them? Not "Look I'm alive!" or "Shame on you for hiding in here!"

Rather Jesus says,

"Peace be with you."

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"Peace be with you."

Jesus has spoken about peace only twice before in John's gospel, both times in the long speech he delivers to the disciples before he is arrested. In one instance, Jesus says, "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" (14:27)

Jesus offers the disciples the gift of peace. And then he is promptly arrested, tried, beaten, and crucified. It's no wonder the disciples are hiding. This man who promised peace experienced only violence; who's to say the disciples wouldn't experience the same thing?

It is an incredibly profound thing that Jesus' first resurrected words to the disciples are "peace be with you." Despite everything that has happened, despite the confusion, the violence, the unrest, Jesus reassures the disciples that his peace persists.

Martin Luther understood this kind of peace well. In his letter titled, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," Martin Luther directly addressed how the people of his day should respond to a deadly plague that swept across Europe. He gave practical advice, like sheltering at home and praying for one's neighbors; and then he said this: "[Christ's] peace is not to remove us from disaster and death, but rather to have peace in the midst of disaster and death, because Christ has already overcome these things."

When we think of peace, we think of the *absence* of violence or suffering or unrest. We think of perfect harmony and agreement, a life of ease and happiness. That sounds pretty good, but it also sounds unlikely. Luther reminds us that Jesus' peace is so profound because it exists *in the midst of* chaos, unrest, and violence. Luther bases this idea on a line that comes later in Jesus'

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farewell speech, Jesus says, "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (16:33).

The peace of this world is fleeting because it depends upon a lack of war, violence, suffering, oppression, pandemic, greed, hunger, thirst, illness, and shame. The peace that comes from this world is unlikely and ephemeral, but Jesus says that he has overcome the world. The evils of this world therefore no longer hold any power. And so Jesus' peace can exist at all times and in all places, even in the midst of war, violence, suffering, oppression, pandemic, greed, hunger, thirst, illness, and shame. Don't get me wrong, the pain of this world is very real, but it is also passing; the peace that Christ gives us will last forever.

It's a nice thought to say that Jesus' peace can exist even in the midst of a terrifying pandemic, but how do we actually experience that peace?

After Jesus walks through the disciples' locked door and wishes them peace, he breathes into them, giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Earlier in Jesus' farewell address, he promised that he would one day give them a Comforter, someone who would always be with them. Here in the locked room Jesus' promise is fulfilled as he breathes the Holy Spirit into his disciples. By the power of the Holy Spirit we, too, can know beyond doubt that Jesus offers us the gift of endless peace. To experience the peace of Jesus is to receive the comfort of the Holy Spirit, who reminds us that no matter what we may face in this life, Jesus has already gathered us into his love and he will never, ever let us go.

And so in the midst of this pandemic, as we sit shut in our houses, Christ walks through our locked doors and says, "Peace be with you." The world is fraught with trouble and pain but Christ has already overcome the world.

So may you feel the presence of the Comforter offering you the peace of Christ this day and always.

Amen.