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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
Second Sunday of Easter (Series C)
April 3, 2016
Text: John 20:19–31¹

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The setting for today's gospel text is simple and straightforward. The events recorded in vs. 19–23 take place on Easter evening. And much has happened. Several women along with Peter and John have gone to Jesus' tomb and found it empty. Jesus' body is missing! What makes things even more perplexing, is that several women are claiming to have seen Jesus alive, risen from the dead!!

On the evening of that very first Easter Sunday, the disciples gather together in what will soon become the pattern for Christ's Church even unto this day. In the near future, Sunday, the first day of the week, will become the Church's day of joy and gladness. But they're not there yet. The disciples gather under the cover of darkness in fear of the Jews (vs. 19) on this first Easter evening. Were they afraid of being arrested? Were they still afraid of being identified as followers of that executed criminal, Jesus of Nazareth? It really doesn't matter. What we do know is that fear was their master, and a tyrant it is.

Fear can create monsters out of shadows. Doom instills the menacing sense of foreboding about the present and the future. Under fear's domination, it seems nothing good will come. Promises once made in good faith are broken because of fear. "We will follow You, Jesus, even to the death" once spoke the disciples. Now, it really looks like that might happen. Doors are locked. Fear gains mastery. Virtue and courage are lost.

Into this murky despair, Jesus suddenly appears, "Peace be with you" (vs. 19). There could not have been a more needed word. And peace is a kindly master. The peace of the Lord is not merely a kind greeting, a sort of "How are you today?" or "Have a good day." This peace, the peace of Jesus, surpasses human understanding. It guards your hearts and minds (Phil. 4:7). The Lord's peace dispels the darkness of fear. For when our dear Lord speaks peace, He gives what He says. "Peace be with you." And then our Lord shows

¹ The inspiration for this sermon came from a sermon preached by Martin Luther in 1534. Thanks be to God for our fathers in the faith.

them His hands and His side (vs. 20) in order to remove any doubts. This *is* the crucified Jesus from Nazareth, risen from the dead. Sin, death, the grave, and fear are conquered. For Jesus is alive. Peace is given.

With these words and actions, Jesus “presents His heart, who He is, and what kind of heart and will He bears to us, as a comfort to all troubled, frightened, and fearful hearts, that they may hope for all good things and every kindness from Him” (Luther). This is the Jesus we worship and adore. He comes to His fearful, failing disciples with words of peace. There is no hint of rebuke for their failures. No chastisement that they all forsook Him in His hour of greatest need and fled for their lives like shameful cowards. Peace be with you!

The first Easter evening teaches that you “should expect from Christ all love, kindness, comfort, salvation, and encouragement, and call on Him in all perils of body and soul, and in all assaults on your faith” (paraphrase of Luther). In the hour of trouble, in the moment of greatest need, the peace-giving, risen Lord will not forsake you. He will not reproach you for your weakness, your sin, your unbelief. Rather, Jesus calls you to Himself, to strengthen you, to uplift you, to give you His peace.

It is the devil who assaults you without mercy. Revelation 12:10 describes Satan as the accuser of the brethren. But Jesus demonstrates His way of treating His disciples in today’s gospel. Peace, resurrection peace. In the peace of Christ, you can and will stand against your adversaries of death, fear, and the devil. This is the Jesus we worship and adore.

And yet we learn more about this risen Savior. Jesus sends His disciples to proclaim His message of peace to the world just as the Father sent Jesus to accomplish this peaceful mission. Listen again to Jesus as He established the gospel ministry of peace in vs. 21–23, “‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when (Jesus) had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.’”

This risen Lord is so concerned with you receiving real, powerful words of peace that He commissions His Church’s ministers to speak with His authority over fear, death, and sin. It’s a great word of comfort to receive Christ’s words of peace and forgiveness spoken authoritatively through His apostles and preachers. To this word of peace, you are to flee for a sure refuge. As Jesus forgave fearful sinners during His earthly ministry so sinners today receive peace and forgiveness. And this word of peace and forgiveness is spoken

until the end of time, until our Lord comes again on the Last Day. “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven.” Dear saints of God hear what your pastor says under Christ’s authority. Your sins are forgiven and Christ’s peace is given to you.

And yet, Christ also authorizes His Church to withhold forgiveness. But only under one condition. When unbelief borne out of a refusal to repent and believe the gospel is openly manifested, then the Church is to withhold peace and forgiveness. Everyone who does not believe in Jesus and anyone claiming the name of Jesus but refuses to turn from their sin in repentance and faith, their sins are retained; they are not forgiven. Even here, this refusal to grant the forgiveness of sins is given with a very specific goal and prayer: that the person hearing such a word would repent of their sin and turn to Jesus, that the repentant sinner may then hear the saving word of peace once again in faith.

“It is a great and excellent thing for the mouth of every honest minister and preacher to be Christ’s mouth, and his word of forgiveness to be Christ’s word of forgiveness” (Luther). Real words of peace are spoken to you each and every Sunday and on other occasions through real flesh and blood men commissioned and authorized to speak in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s Word of peace is the great heritage of Christ’s holy Church. The Lord would not leave His people guessing as to their source of peace. Real words, real authority, real forgiveness, real peace producing real faith and real Christian fruits of obedience, virtue, and love.

Thus far we have heard and seen what kind of Jesus the Church worships: a Lord who is kind but powerful in giving His gifts of peace. Such a Christ is seen in the first part of our gospel text, vs. 19–23. And yet, we see this same Jesus all the more in the second portion of today’s text, vs. 24–31. The setting for these verses of Scripture is likewise simple and clear. It’s a week later, the second Sunday of Easter. The week before, when Jesus appeared speaking words of peace and words of commission to forgive and retain sins, Thomas wasn’t there; Thomas skipped church!

In vs. 24–31, we see what kind of Jesus the Church worships in how our Lord treats Thomas. During the week after Jesus’ first appearance, the disciples tell Thomas what took place. They saw Jesus, heard His word of peace, saw the scars in His feet and side.

But Thomas isn’t willing to believe “unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side” (vs. 25). All of us can relate to Thomas. The claims of Christ’s resurrection are so extraordinary that we can appreciate the desire for proof. Jesus is patient with Thomas. Jesus appears again, on Sunday a week later. This time, Thomas makes it to church. Jesus grants Thomas’

request so that He might bring Thomas out of doubt and skepticism into faith, trust, and peace. And our Lord speaks the same word of peace to Thomas that He did to the other disciples the week before, “Peace be with you” (vs. 26). Is it not easy to see and rejoice in this Lord who “does not desire to overturn or reject the weak in faith, but bears patiently with their weakness, not snarling at them frightfully, but handling them gently and respectfully” (Luther).

In Thomas, we see our Lord’s patience with weak sinners. Jesus did not disqualify Thomas from being an apostle of peace and forgiveness. Thomas was lovingly brought back into the safety of Christ’s Church so that he too could worship in peace, “My Lord and my God!” (vs. 28). Those words form the heart and core of our Christian faith to this day.

These things are written that you may know what kind of Savior you, me, and the holy Christian Church worships. This Jesus seeks us out and gives us His eternal peace in spite of our sins, weaknesses, and fears. They are forgiven, forever cast away in the death and resurrection of the peace-giving Lord Jesus.

Into the midst of whatever you are facing in your life today, tomorrow, and into the future, Jesus has a powerful and authoritative word for you, “Peace be with you.”

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.