

SERMON TITLE: "Peace Be with You"
SERMON TEXT: John 20:19-31
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 24, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I hope it was meaningful for you to hear the Bell Tones play the Ukrainian National Anthem. When I first read the translation of the lyrics, I almost cried. Those are such powerful words: "Ukraine is not yet dead . . . Our enemies will vanish . . . we . . . will rule in our land . . . [and] we'll not spare either our souls or bodies to get freedom." No wonder the Ukrainian soldiers and citizens have such a will to stand up against the Russian aggression. No wonder they want so much to restore their land to peace.

Something else in today's worship music inspired me. You probably didn't notice this, but the hymn, "Christ Is Risen," is sung to a traditional Polish tune. I thought that was a nice detail. The violence, chaos, and upheaval in Ukraine has been so horrific for the refugees who have been fleeing, but the generous help of the Polish people has provided tremendous compassion and peace.

What the world needs now is peace—in Ukraine, in the Middle East, in U.S. cities where there are endless shootings, and in so many other places. And hasn't it always been that way—since the first family, when Cain killed his brother Abel?

I suppose that's why Jesus said what he did to his disciples when he appeared to them on Easter evening. In the past few days they had experienced the trauma of his crucifixion, and then Jesus' body had disappeared from the tomb. Mary Magdalene had reported seeing and talking with Jesus, but the others didn't know what to make of that. Their thoughts and emotions would have been in a horrible jumble. And, so, they were hiding behind locked doors, afraid for their lives. And that's when the resurrected Jesus appeared and said, "Peace be with you."

Because we all long for physical, emotional, and spiritual peace, let's take a look at John, chapter 20. Let's see how we too can receive the blessing of God's peace.

1—KNOW THAT JESUS IS WITH YOU

The first way the disciples realized peace was by knowing that Jesus was with them. As soon as the disciples saw Jesus in the room with them, their whole demeanor changed. Verse 20 tells us that those fearful followers rejoiced at seeing their risen Lord. They had been afraid that Jesus was gone from them forever. Despite all that Jesus had said about coming back for them, despite all that he had said about sending a comforter to be with them, despite all his assurances that everything would be OK, the disciples just couldn't realize it until they saw him.

But now that Jesus had returned to be with them, they knew. They knew that he would always be there, whether they could see him or not. They knew that Jesus' life was greater than his death. They knew that he was immortal with God, and that meant Jesus would be with them forever too. Sure, they still had to face the hostile Jewish authorities. Yes, they still had to face the formidable Romans. Certainly, they still had a lot of things to figure out about what they were going to do next. But at least they knew they weren't alone. If Jesus could get out of that tomb of death *and* gain access to them hidden in that house behind locked doors, then Jesus could be with them anywhere.

I can't think of anything more comforting than knowing that Jesus is with me. I think that's why the song "In the Garden" has been so popular for so many decades. Reminiscent of Mary's conversation with the resurrected Jesus in the garden near the tomb, the song describes meeting Jesus in the garden among the roses and the birds and hearing his comforting voice. The refrain affirms, "And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own; and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known."¹ You gain great peace when you know that Jesus is with you.

2—RECEIVE & SHARE THE SPIRIT OF FORGIVENESS

In verses 21-23, we see that the second way we experience peace is by receiving and sharing the spirit of forgiveness. Jesus didn't appear to the disciples just for old times' sake. Jesus returned to them to let them know he had forgiven them. As you recall, the time just before Jesus' crucifixion hadn't

exactly been their finest hours. The disciples betrayed Jesus, denied knowing him, and ran away when the going got tough. You can bet the disciples were feeling a whole lot of guilt along with their grief. So Jesus came back to let them know that nothing they had done was so terrible that God couldn't overcome it. By returning to them alive, Jesus was assuring them that they had another chance to serve in Jesus' ministry. He was there with them, breathing on them the spirit of forgiveness.

That reminds me of a story about Thomas Edison. Thomas Edison was working on a crazy contraption called a "light bulb," and it took a whole team of men 24 straight hours to put just one bulb together. The story goes that, when Edison's team was finished with that first light bulb, he gave it to a young boy helper, who nervously carried it up the stairs. Step by step he cautiously watched his hands, obviously frightened of dropping such a priceless piece of work. He made it all the way up the stairs only to stumble at the top, causing the bulb to shatter. It took 24 more hours to make another bulb. Finally, tired and ready for a break, Edison was ready to have this second bulb carried up the stairs. Who do you think Edison gave it to? He gave it to the same young boy who dropped the first one.²

There's nothing like the forgiveness of a second chance, and that was just the kind of peace Jesus' disciples needed. Until they saw Jesus, they were stuck in guilt and self-doubt. Jesus had trained them to continue his work, but since they had messed up so badly, maybe they weren't fit for the job. But now here was Jesus, saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Almost as if nothing had gone wrong at all, Jesus returned to them, breathed on them the spirit of forgiveness, and empowered the disciples to move forward in their own ministry of sharing Christ's forgiving peace.

The world needs to know this peace that comes through forgiveness. There's a story from Spain about "a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set out to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find [his son], the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper." Today, the father would have used social media. But back then, when young people still read newspapers, the ad said: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office

at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father.’ On Saturday, 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.”³

Apparently there are a lot of people who are longing for the peace of mind that comes with forgiveness. That’s what Jesus was giving to his disciples and us. And that’s what we’re sent out to share with others. Jesus didn’t breathe forgiveness on the disciples just for them to keep it to themselves. He indicated that they had the Holy Spirit power to forgive *others*—in fact, to *any* others. Jesus put no limit on whom they could forgive. If we don’t have peace, maybe we need to forgive more. Like another hymn says, “Freely, freely, you have received. Freely, freely give. Go in my name, and because you believe, others will know that I live.”⁴ The peace of our risen Christ will be with us when we both receive and share forgiveness.

3—GOD PROVIDES US THE RESOURCES TO BELIEVE

Jesus said, “Peace be with you,” three times in these verses. The third time is in verse 26, when Jesus came back to the disciples a week later. Again Jesus was able to make his way to them, even though they were shut up inside a house, hiding from the authorities. This time, Thomas was there, which was good, because Thomas hadn’t believed their story of seeing Jesus earlier.

In this famous “doubting Thomas” story, Jesus invited Thomas to put his finger in Jesus’ wounded hands and side. We aren’t told whether or not Thomas actually did that, but he certainly came to believe. Whether it was by seeing, hearing, or touching, we don’t know. But, absolutely, there were enough resources there to draw Thomas to the point of faith, at which he exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”

The purpose of the Gospel of John—along with the other three gospels and all the writings of the New Testament—is to provide adequate resources so that people throughout the ages and around the world can find peace through believing that Jesus Christ is Lord. Even though Jesus’ resurrection is now 2000 years in the past, we still have this wonderful witness to what the earliest followers of Jesus experienced. Whether it was through the senses of sight, hearing, and touch of Jesus’ body; whether it

was through the smell and taste of communion bread and wine or fish cooked on a beach that brought Jesus back to them; whether it was through recognizing the God-and-Jesus-connection over and over again in the Hebrew scriptures; or whether it was through a spiritual dream or some other mystical sense that couldn't be shaken—those earliest disciples believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. God had given them the resources to believe that Jesus was alive and that his ministry was moving forward. Not even death itself could hold back the progress of Jesus' love and grace and healing power.

God provided what those first disciples needed so they could believe and find peace. And God provides those resources for us today. The wisdom of scripture, the power of prayer, the uplifting praise of worship and music, the spiritual strength of the sacraments, the challenge to grow in Christian education classes, the caring inclusivity of Christian fellowship, and the mission opportunities within and outside the church—through all these tangible and real experiences, God provides abundant resources for our belief so that we can know the peace of Christ.

CONCLUSION

Some members of our church have been keeping vigil this week at the bedside of a friend who has been nearing death. As I checked in periodically, I could see him slipping away toward that final rest in the peaceful arms of our loving God. Hopefully we'll all find our way to that peace eventually. In the meantime, though, we can find peace in our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies through knowing that Jesus is with us, by receiving and sharing the spirit of forgiveness, and by taking advantage of the many resources God provides to help us believe. Wherever we are and whatever we're going through, Jesus says to us, "Peace be with you!"

¹By C. Austin Miles, 1913.

²Paraphrase from <https://wandervogeldiary.wordpress.com/2015/09/08/broken-bulb/>

³<https://bible.org/illustration/800-pacos>, quoting Bits & Pieces, Oct. 15, 1992, p. 13.

⁴"Freely, Freely," by Carol Owens, c. 1972 Communique Music, Inc.