

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
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John 20:19 – 23

Peace Be with You

What were they to do? The man they had followed for three years had been killed, *crucified*. He had died the most shameful death even *Rome* didn't want to record in history. And instead of remaining faithful to him, they fell away, one by one. One betrayed him, one ran away, another denied him, and the others went missing – all except for John and a few women.

On the third day, Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb and found the stone rolled away. She ran to tell Peter and John, and they too ran to the tomb. No body was to be found. The two disciples left, but Mary stayed and wept. Then a man called her name, "Mary," and she knew it was her Lord, Jesus! She went to tell the disciples.

Reports were spreading that Jesus had been taken from the tomb, and the *disciples* were to blame. But how could they have moved the heavy stone away from the tomb without the guards waking? Where would they have put his body?

Why would they have stolen his body? So that others would follow this Jesus movement and become *their* disciples? No, they had no desire to steal his body. They had no desire to start a movement. They were *followers*, disciples, and it was *Jesus* that they followed. And now, his body was on the loose, and perhaps he had risen, just as Mary said. But how were they to know for sure, or if they would see him, or what would happen to them? Better to hide for as long as possible.

Afraid for their lives and unsure what to do, they gather together and lock the doors.

The disciples seem like cowards, but what are they to do? If they go anywhere, they are *sure* to be caught. And if they look for Jesus, would Jesus want to see them? Almost all of them fell away. So they wait.

Do you remember hiding as a child? You did something you *knew* you weren't supposed to do, but you did it anyway. You were afraid of the punishment, so you hid. The suspense may have been worse than the punishment.

And *through* their locked door, Jesus comes and stands in the middle of the disciples. He opens his mouth and says, "Peace be with you!" (Jn 20:19b). He does not scold them for falling away or for hiding.

Now, it's easy to disregard what Jesus says here because "Peace be with you" is a common greeting in Scripture. We even know it so well, because we share the peace with one another in the traditional service. "Peace be with you," we say as we shake hands.

A congregation I once served did *not* like to share the peace. Whenever a new pastor would come and try to insert "sharing the peace" into the service, the congregation would complain and ask to take it out. They thought it was awkward and unnecessary. When I explained to one congregant that sharing the peace was not meant to be an opportunity to catch up with your neighbor, she was surprised. Sharing the peace is practiced so that the congregation can share with their neighbor that there is peace between them.

When Jesus says, "Peace be with you!" he is not hoping that the disciples will *feel* peaceful, but is *telling* them that there is peace *between* them. Jesus does not hold their sin against them; he *forgives* them. He comes through their locked door, stands among them, and forgives them.

The disciples see that this *is* Jesus, the one whose hands and side were pieced. He is the same person, with reminders of their sin *in* his body. He is the same person, but can somehow walk through doors.

Jesus again says, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (Jn 20:21). *There is peace between us because I have forgiven you. I am not holding your sin against you. And I am sending you out as I was sent out.*

And how did God the Father send His Son? He gave His Son to the world, empowered him with the Holy Spirit in his baptism, so that he would preach the Good News and forgive the world.

Jesus breathes on them, and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn 20:22). Jesus was given the Holy Spirit before *his* ministry, and he now gives the Holy Spirit to his disciples before *their* new ministry.

This is easy enough to follow, but perhaps what is most confusing or troublesome is what Jesus says next. He says, “If you forgive anyone [their] sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (Jn 20:23b). This verse has been interpreted a number of ways. It has led people to withhold forgiveness from others. It’s led people to believe that only the pastor or priest has the ability to forgive sins. Or, this verse has been thrown out altogether, because it’s confusing.

So what *does* Jesus mean here? Let’s allow the Gospel of John to help interpret for us. Jesus has just given his disciples the Holy Spirit, and through the Spirit the power to forgive – or not to forgive. Please turn in your Bibles to John 16, beginning with verse 7. Jesus tells his disciples, “But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said that the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you” (Jn 16:7 – 15).

The *Spirit* will convict the world, not Jesus’ disciples. The *Spirit* will convict people of their sin and lead them to repentance. The *Spirit* will convict people that Jesus is the truth and lead them in the path of righteousness.

Jesus’ disciples do not have the power to convict the world of sin or of God’s truth, but the Holy Spirit *through* the words and actions of Jesus’ disciples convicts. Jesus’ disciples do not have power in themselves, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, his disciples are *called* to this ministry of forgiveness. Jesus’ disciples are called to continue the mission, the work of Jesus. These words are Jesus’ Great Commission in the Gospel of John; Jesus’ disciples are to extend forgiveness, the peace of God, with the world. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The call to follow Christ always means a call to share the work of forgiving men their sins.”¹ How else will the world know God’s forgiveness?

You and I are given the Holy Spirit in baptism and given the ministry of forgiveness, as we too have been forgiven. We speak the truth of God in Christ Jesus and it is the Holy Spirit’s work to convict the heart of the person, leading them to repentance.

Two years after surviving Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, “Corrie ten Boom was asked to speak to a group of Germans about the power of forgiveness. We must, as she put it, grasp that God hurls our sins into the deepest sea and says, “No fishing allowed’... ‘The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush – the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister’s frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! That place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard – one of the most cruel guards.

“Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 90.

“And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course – how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying. ‘I was a guard there.’ No, he did not remember me. ‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein’ – again the hand came out – ‘will you forgive me?’

“And I stood there – I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven – and could not forgive.

“[My sister] Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could have been many seconds that he stood there – hand held out – but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

“For I had to do it – I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us... And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart.

“But forgiveness is not an emotion – I knew that, too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’

“And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’ For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.”²

The power of the Holy Spirit to you is to form you into the likeness of Jesus Christ and to forgive. Like the disciples on that first Easter, you are forgiven. Jesus sees your sin and does not condemn you, but forgives you. And he has given you the Holy Spirit in your baptism to forgive through his power that *all* might come to know Jesus Christ.

Please receive this as your prayer, as our prayer, the Church.

O Spirit of the living God, thou Light and Fire Divine
 Descend upon Thy Church once more and make it truly Thine
 Fill it with love and joy and power, with righteousness and peace
 Till Christ shall dwell in human hearts, and sin and sorrow cease.

Blow, wind of God, with wisdom blow until our minds are free
 From mists of error, clouds of doubt, which blind our eyes to Thee
 Burn, winged fire, inspire our lips with flaming love and zeal
 To preach to all Thy great good news, God's glorious commonweal.

So shall we know the power of Christ, who came this world to save
 So shall we rise with Him to life which soars beyond the grave
 And earth shall win true holiness which makes Thy children whole
 Till, perfected by Thee, we reach creation's glorious goal³

May we forgive as we have been forgiven. Peace be with you. Amen.

² Glenn McDonald, *Morning Reflection*, 7/22/16.

³ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/audreyassad/spiritofthelivinggod.html>