

## **In Christ, Hope Springs Eternal**

Revelations 1:4-8; John 20:19-23

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**Introduction:** We continue on our Eastertide journey. In our lesson today the disciples are afraid and hiding.

### **John 20:19-23**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the people, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

**Prayer:** Gracious God, come to us in the Holy Spirit and open us to understand Your unique and personal message to each of us. Amen.

A four-year-old and a six-year-old presented their mom with a houseplant. They had used their own money to buy it and she was thrilled. The older child said with a sad face, "There was a bouquet at the flower shop that we wanted to give you. We thought it would be just perfect since you are always asking for a little peace so you can rest. It was real pretty but it was too expensive. It had a ribbon on it that said, 'Rest in Peace.'" We could all use a little peace!

We live in despairing times, from the world situation to our personal circumstances. Like Thomas, most of us feel like we have missed something. Where is the future we envisioned? What happened to our dreams, including our dreams for our children? The "American Dream" of working hard and becoming successful seems to be gone. Even our "American Dream" of democracy seems to be broken.

But I believe things are improving. I see a new spirit in our community; confidence seems to be returning. I see a new spirit here at Geneva, too. In a couple of weeks we will have three new members and the Easter egg hunt brought families from the Day School and the community who enjoyed the hunt and asked questions about the church.

So I believe things are getting better, but sometimes we need to jumpstart our own hope and that is where Jesus comes in: in Christ, hope springs eternal.

The disciples were living in despairing times. They lived in an oppressed country in a cruel economy. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, in those days over half of their income went to taxes. The disciples had drawn hope for the future in Jesus, but now they thought He was dead. The first to see Jesus were the women, but the disciples didn't know what to believe. (Once again, Jesus did the surprising thing having women be the first witnesses in a time when women were not allowed to witness in court or most anywhere else.)

The disciples are afraid. They are huddling behind a locked door. They are despairing. And then, Jesus is there with them. (Locked doors have never been particularly effective against Christ.)

I'm not sure they were thrilled to see Jesus. Remember they had all betrayed Jesus, but His words were not angry, judging, or scolding. His words were healing. The first thing he said was "peace."

We could all use some peace. The peace that Jesus is talking about is the peace beyond understanding. It's hard, but all we have to do is reach out to Christ. He promises that if we will turn our lives over to Him, He will give us peace. The most moving account of this process that I have ever read is a book by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, who was the Archbishop of Chicago. As explained on the jacket cover of his book *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections* by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin,

"In the last two months of his life, he made it his ultimate mission to share his personal reflections and insights as a legacy to those he left behind. His book *The Gift of Peace* reveals the Cardinal's spiritual growth amid a string of traumatic events: a false accusation of sexual abuse; reconciliation a year later with his accuser, who had recanted the charges; a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and surgery; the return of cancer, now in his liver; his decision to discontinue chemotherapy and live his remaining days as fully as possible. In the book the Cardinal tells his story openly and honestly, and shares the profound peace he came to at the end of his life. He accepted his peace as a gift from God, and he in turn shared that gift with the world." [From the jacket cover of *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections* by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, (Image Books, Doubleday: New York, 1997)]

Cardinal Bernardin writes that to open himself to the Lord's peace, he had to empty himself. He had to let go of all the things he wanted to control. He describes the process as one that meant letting go and handing everything over to God again and again. Emptying himself was not a one-time decision. It was a continuing process.

For me, one of the most important ways I have found peace is placing people I'm angry with into God's hands. I pray, "Lord, I need to forgive this person, but I'm having trouble doing it. Could I place them in Your hands?" This also works for people you are worried about. I often pray, "Heavenly Father, I'm so worried about so-and-so. I'm anxious and fretful. I hand them over to Your care. Bring them what they need. Amen"

It is a process, but the more I empty myself and place my trust in God, the more peaceful I feel.

The second thing that Jesus gives His disciples is purpose. He says “Peace” again and then He says, “As the Father sent me, I send you.” When we are stressing over what is going on in the world and our lives, a very helpful thing is to find something to do that is important. We need a purpose and Jesus gives us the most important purpose. He commissions us along with the disciples to the reconciling work of God. Jesus came to demonstrate the love of God for all the world. By loving one another as Jesus loves, we reveal God to the world.

I don’t think there is a more important purpose than sharing the love of God. We can do it in so many ways. We might be worrying about the things we can’t control, but there are lots of things we can control. We can be kind to the people we meet. We can help the people around us. We can volunteer anywhere we have an interest.

The last time I took my mother out for lunch is over a year ago. When I got her to Friendly’s, I had trouble getting her out of the car, but we managed. However, when I tried to move her from her wheelchair back into the car, I couldn’t do it. She was unable to stand and to hold on to me. I wasn’t sure what to do. I couldn’t leave her in the parking lot to get help from the restaurant. I realized that I was going to have to call 911. Just then a tall, strong woman came up to me and said, “Can I help you?”

I explained the problem and she asked me to step aside. Then she lifted my mother from the wheelchair to the front seat of the car. As I thanked her, I said, “You seemed to know what you were doing.” She smiled and explained that she was a medical doctor. She knew exactly how to lift my mother.

I will always think of that woman as an angel, an angel with a purpose. She didn’t limit her skills to patients in the hospital, she shared the love of her work to help a couple of struggling people in a parking lot.

Our most important purpose is the one given to us by Christ: sharing the love of God in every way possible. Strengthening our loving nature is something we can do even when everything else seems to be falling apart.

The third thing that Jesus gives is the Holy Spirit. When we begin to explore our call, the Spirit will lead us and empower us, just as the Spirit led the first disciples and apostles. If we have any doubt about the power of the Holy Spirit, all we need to do is look at what the early followers of Jesus did. They were a pretty ragtag group. Most were uneducated and rather poor, but somehow empowered by the Spirit of the Lord they changed the world. They brought the message of Christ to us. They did that by living out the love of Jesus Christ. In their love they revealed the love of God. And this was not a sentimental love. This was a love that faced persecution and martyrdom. Only the power of the Spirit could have given them the strength to do it.

When the power of the Spirit leads us, we are transformed. We find ourselves as individuals and as a church changed forever. In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris writes,

Not long ago I heard a novice speak of a nun with Alzheimer's in her community, who every day insists on being placed in her wheelchair at the entrance to the monastery's nursing home wing so that she can greet everyone who comes. "She is no longer certain what she is welcoming people to," the younger woman explained, "but hospitality is so deeply ingrained in her that it has become her whole life." Better an old fool welcoming people at the door with her whole heart and soul...than a distracted, cold, or officious monk or nun with faculties intact. [Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 265.]

Once the Spirit takes hold, we will find ourselves doing what needs to be done. Our identity as individuals, a people, and as a church is shaped by the gifts we receive from the risen Jesus, gifts He promised as a way of ensuring His continuing presence among us. We have been given the gift of peace; we must accept it. We have been given the gift of purpose; the Lord has great things for us to do. And we have been given the gift of the Spirit, who will help us find our mission and empower us to fulfill it. With these gifts of Christ, hope springs eternal. Amen