

A Risen Savior's Greetings

Easter Sunrise Service—April 4, 2021—6:30 a.m. in the grove
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

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 Jews, 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."

Occasionally an Easter sunrise service will be presented as an opportunity to "come out early and greet our Risen Savior!" This is a wonderful and thoughtful way to explain the meaning of Easter early morning worship, for that was the day when Jesus met and greeted the disciples. (I suppose Jesus did most of the greeting, as the disciples were too panicked and confused to know what to do.) This explanation of Easter worship leads to a natural and appropriate question: what were these greetings? This being an early morning service it would seem that I should be focusing upon some early morning encounters with Our Lord, but most of the early morning activities were defined by fear and confusion. It was in the evening that we find Jesus greeting the disciples, and these greetings, brief though they were, are loaded with meaning and worthy of our careful attention on this Easter morning as we greet the Risen Lord.

It is an understatement to say that Jesus took the initiative in greeting his followers, for they had locked themselves away in fear. John tells us, *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 Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."* Jesus spoke three greetings to them and this first word was the most important. Jesus spoke peace to them. It may be sweet for a moment to hear the pronouncement *Peace be with you*, but let us be honest with ourselves on this matter. How many of you have heard these words, and found your hearts responding in a less than kind manner? "What peace? I don't feel any peace! Let me tell you about my life and my worried mind. It's full of everything but peace!" Jesus' promise of peace may sound pleasant for a moment, but soon there comes that great disappointment. "Jesus is promising me peace, and I am not feeling any of it!" Too often we give this conflict

little thought and presume that Jesus is offering us religious talk which is meant to feel good in Church but is not worth a whole lot when we bring it home. Can Jesus really give us peace?

To understand Jesus' gift of peace we must pause and consider the setting in which those words were spoken. In the past few days Jesus had been betrayed and deserted by these men, and was then handed over to be tortured, humiliated and crucified while these alleged "followers" fled. Miraculously Jesus had been raised from the dead. He was resurrected. His body was restored and He was more alive than ever. Now he appeared to his disciples. What was he going to say? These men were overwhelmed by shame and guilt over what they had done. What would Jesus tell them? Would he angrily deride them for their faithlessness and cowardice? This would certainly seem most appropriate! No. His first word to them was peace. He came in love, and all was forgiven. Jesus expressed to them the love of His peace and grace. How relieved they were to hear such a word of restoration. The weight of the world had been lifted off their shoulders. When Jesus returned to us from the dead he came in peace, and this peace was an unspeakable relief and joy to the disciples. By human thinking Jesus would have returned to take vengeance on his enemies, but instead He came in love!

This word was one of tremendous relief to the disciples. Is it a relief to you? It has become an unchallenged truism that God loves us all, and we say this very glibly, but deep down, do we really believe this? There are many folks out there, both within and outside the Church, who seriously doubt God's love for them. Jesus cleared that matter up once and for all when he died for our sins to reconcile us to God. He died at the hands of the very people that He came to save. What an amazing love! Jesus said *Peace be with you*, and He wants us to know that our friendship with God has been restored and that we are loved and completely forgiven.

Let there be no doubt on this Easter day that Jesus looks at us in love and gives us peace with God. Let it also be known that the world and the prince of this world do *not* wish us peace! In fact, the ruler of this world is most disturbed when we are at peace with God and not in full harmony with this corrupt world system. The peace of God is a precious gift which we must cherish in our spirits, and while we cherish it, we must resist the enemy who is trying hard to destroy both us and that peace. We do not live in a peaceful world, but Jesus freely gives us peace with God, and that is a gift which lasts forever.

Having given them peace, Jesus wasted no time in giving them an assignment. *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* The disciples, now apostles, were being sent on a mission. This should have been no surprise to them as Jesus was always in the habit of going and sending, but their minds must have been buzzing with thought on this one. Where will we be going? What will their message and work be? In this second greeting Jesus repeated the gift of peace,

which made obvious the message which they were to be spreading. As they had received God's peace, the world was to also receive peace, and they were to be the communicators of that gift. How this world still needs to hear!

They were to go as Jesus went into the world. They were to love and to preach as Jesus did, and they had all been well trained and prepared for this next leg of their journey. This moment with Jesus was full of joy and glad relief, but there was also a deep solemnity and warning in Jesus' words. They were to be sent just as Jesus was sent by God, and Jesus told them this after showing them his hands and side. Just as the world resisted and opposed Jesus' words and ministry, so the disciples would face opposition. It could get ugly. Each of the disciples would go on to face countless hardships and be killed for their faith. The only exception to this is believed to be John who suffered enough tortures that one would never count him as the lucky disciple.

Jesus' final greeting was a word of empowerment and authority. *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* Like all of us, the apostles often felt unqualified and unprepared for their work, but so much of this thinking is not of God. One of our favorite Christian pastimes is making endless claims that we are not qualified to do whatever task God is calling us to perform. One of our favorite excuses is that "I don't know enough Bible to be able to really serve God." What is so amusing about that excuse is that if we did find a person who knew the Bible through and through and had an answer for every question, we would probably say that this person is too bookish to really be a servant of God because he or she can't relate to ordinary people! God has given believers His Spirit, and by the Spirit's power we can do all sorts of great things for God. We seldom feel this presence and power of God, and this too makes us shy, but the Spirit is not a matter of feelings. I once heard a hospital chaplain tell of their deep conviction that when they are called to a troubled situation, they usually do not feel that God is with them, but they are convinced that once they get to that room of fear and crisis, they will find the Spirit there in abundance! So it is in Christ's service. Go to the place of service ready to do all you can for the Lord and trusting that you will find the Spirit and power there.

It is hard for us to believe that we have such power, yet we have witnessed this power of God. In our day of polarized politics, I hear people lament that no matter what we say we cannot change people's minds. Indeed, we cannot. But when we tell the Good News of Jesus Christ the Spirit of God goes to work and changes hearts and minds. Consider how your own heart and mind has been changed and shaped by God over the years.

And God has also given us authority. We become so enamored of diplomas, certificates and who is the smartest person in the room, that we lose sight of what true authority is all about. We have the Word of God, the Creator of heaven and earth. We have the witness of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We have the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us not be so shy for there is some urgency to our mission.

We have been greeted by the Risen Lord, and there was a lot communicated in those few words of greeting. We have been incredibly loved and have a message of love to tell the world. As Jesus has faithfully communicated that greeting to us, let us go and greet a dark and fearful world.