

4.24.2022 Easter 2

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Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 150; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

“Through believing you have life”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Have you ever thought about the purpose of the gospels, about why they were written? The last part of today’s gospel sums up the purpose of not only John’s gospel, but of all the gospels. John writes, “*But these [things] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*” The purpose of the gospels is to lead humanity to faith that Jesus is the Messiah, and that “*through believing*” we may have life in Jesus’ name.

The purpose of the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John was not simply to give historical information about Jesus, but to give witness to new life with Jesus. We read the gospels not simply seeking information about Jesus, but we read seeking the living presence of Christ. In a world in need of peace, forgiveness, and hope, the gospels lead us to new life with Jesus Christ.

The Easter accounts of Jesus appearing to his disciples are not simply historical stories, but witnesses to the new life that Jesus’ disciples experienced with the resurrected Jesus. The gospels caused them, and now us, us to know Jesus’ peace, forgiveness, and hope. Christianity grows because of the faith and courage of people who know the living presence of Jesus alive in them through faith. Each of us stands upon the shoulders of men and women who have shared with us the peace, forgiveness and hope that they received from Jesus. Those whom we meet, will I hope, say the same about our witness to them. Christianity is not simply the telling of historical information; it is sharing a living reality that is the risen Christ Jesus.

Today’s gospel tells us something crucially important about Jesus and the church that he brings into existence. On Easter Sunday evening, Jesus appeared to the disciples and said, “*Peace be with you.*” Jesus came to his disciples, who were hidden and fearful. His words and presence gave them peace, and the assurance of forgiveness and hope.

Today’s gospel from John has been called “The Charter of the Church,” because Jesus commissions his disciples saying, “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” In these words we already see Easter anticipating Pentecost. From the very beginning Jesus has sent his church into the world in mission. Jesus identified his own having been sent by the Father with his sending of the church into the world with peace and forgiveness.

This means Jesus' mission is dependent upon his church; this means the church is dependent upon Jesus. Without Jesus the church has no message or mission.

On Easter evening, Jesus came to his disciples, not with anger and retribution, saying, "Why didn't you defend and fight for me in this world," rather Jesus says, "*Peace be with you.*" In a world of human betrayal and conflict, fear and anxiety, Jesus comes to his disciples with peace and forgiveness.

Jesus then breathed on his disciples, saying, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" Upon hearing this story, anyone familiar with the creation story should immediately be reminded of Genesis 2:7, when God breathed the breath of life into the first human being. In giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples, Jesus was giving the breath of life to his church. Without Jesus' breath of new life in the Spirit, there is no church.

Jesus then said, "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*" By saying this, Jesus made the message of the church one of God's peace and the forgiveness of sin. This message shapes our mission as a church. Each Sunday, we begin worship by returning to God seeking and hearing the assurance of forgiveness – words of peace with God and with one another.

Jesus' words about retaining sins are also a warning to us: it is only in opening our hearts and seeking forgiveness that we are forgiven. Perhaps you have been so hurt or made angry by someone that you have said, "I will never forgive them." Or perhaps you have hurt someone, and out of pride, you have not sought their forgiveness. The retaining of sins happens when we neglect to forgive and when we neglect to seek forgiveness.

Jesus returned again to his disciples a week later to speak with Thomas. Jesus could not forget Thomas. How could Jesus have forgotten Thomas, who had said in John 11:16 at the news that Lazarus had died, "*Let us also go that we may die with him.*" Like many of us, Thomas was impulsive, quick to act and yet slow to believe. Thomas understood the cross and dying, and though he was ready to die with Lazarus, he was slow to believe in Jesus' new life of peace and forgiveness. To Thomas, Jesus came with peace, forgiveness and new life.

Like Thomas, over and over again, we also are moved from doubt and fear, anger and hurt, to peace, forgiveness and hope – each time someone comes to us with the Spirit of Christ, speaking words of peace and forgiveness. This is what we are called to do as a church, speak words of peace and forgiveness, words of reconciliation with God and with one another.

There is an image that has been on my mind this Easter week. It is of a man hiding in a basement in Ukraine and crossing himself in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as the ground above him is being shelled. This scene reminds me that, in places around the world, human beings continue to hide in rooms, in basements, in places of fear, of war, and of the fear of others. These may be rooms we are compelled into for safety, and they may be fearful rooms of our own making. The Easter story continues, and in crossing himself, that man was inviting Christ to be with him in a locked room of fear.

We are called to be signs of Christ's peace, forgiveness and hope in a very broken world. This is what we do; this is our mission. The purpose of the gospel is so that "*through believing you may have life in his name.*" We are to be messengers and we are also to be the message.

Perhaps you have heard the phrase, "Charity begins at home." This phrase is often said in a less than generous, and somewhat miserly, manner. However, Christian charity never stays at home; it always moves outward. The word "charity" is a translation of the Latin word *caritas*, from the Greek word *agape*, meaning God's self-sacrificial love. Like Jesus, who didn't simply stay in his eternal home, but was sent into this world, Jesus sends his church in mission always outward into a world in need of hope. Every Sunday we are commissioned and sent outward bearing God's *caritas*, God's love for the world.

This is why we reach outward feeding the hungry and homeless; this is why we support our Synod and the work of the ELCA, its seminaries and its global mission; this is why we support agencies like Lutheran World Relief – we reach outward in love so that we can reach the basements, rooms and places where people are hidden in fear, where people need help and hope. This is why we are in mission.

Jesus sends us today into a world of war and violence. Jesus sends his church with his words, "*Peace be with you.*" As you speak these words, believe that Jesus speaks through you.

Believing in his name, may you have life.

And through you, may others know a life of peace, forgiveness and hope. Amen.