

3rd Sunday of Easter
April 18, 2021

Text: Luke 24:36b-48

Theme: The Way of Peace

Grace and peace to you from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

It is still Easter and the joy of the season still resounds in our hearts. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen! Alleluia! On such a glorious day the disciples should have been dancing in the streets. Instead they sat huddled behind locked doors out of fear that those who crucified Jesus would come after them as well.

It was a legitimate concern. Oh how they struggled to understand what happened on that fateful Friday. It was bad enough they had to watch Jesus die on the cross. Now there were rumors going around that Jesus might still be alive. It was still Easter when some women talked about the tomb being empty. Some men from Emmaus talked about how this stranger started walking with them on their way home and later revealed himself as Jesus when they broke bread together. As the disciples sat immersed in confusion and fear, Jesus appeared out of nowhere and stood among them. We can only imagine their utter surprise. They were startled, terrified, and even more frightened now that they saw him in the flesh.

I (for one) do not question the reaction of the disciples. Fear is a very real and strong and powerful emotion. It has held some of us captive for over a year now. I saw on the news this week that in one community protestors ignited a big bonfire and then everyone threw their masks into the flames. In sharp contrast I know that people still remain in isolation out of fear of getting the virus or its variants.

It has been another week of violence in our nation. My personal fear is that we will resume where we left off just a year ago with so many mass shootings that ignited so many riots. Currently I am reading the John Meacham book about John Lewis. It describes in graphic detail the events that took place as riots after riots erupted in our streets in the 60s. It is being played out for us once more right before our eyes.

Our fears can be centered on the events of the world or they can be personal. We have added columns to our prayer list as an inordinate number of family members and friends are facing serious illnesses. Others are unemployed. Still others are depressed and lonely and do not know how to reconnect. We sit in our own confusion and fear.

And then we hear Jesus – Why are you frightened? Why do doubts arise in your hearts? Come closer to me and look at my hands and my feet. See for yourselves that it is I who stands before you. Touch me and see.

If only we could see Jesus and touch him. If only we could get that close to him to look at his hands and his feet. It would make all the difference in the world if we could just see for ourselves. But we are so many generations away from that moment in time. Instead we are asked to lean on our faith and the witness of those who have gone before us. We are asked to believe with our whole heart that we are never alone.

Let me take you back to Luke 1. It is a Bible verse that we can add to our list to be memorized and fits perfectly with our lesson. It reads – *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

By the tender mercy of God, Jesus went through locked doors to be with his disciples. Jesus broke through to those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of his death. He came to them in order to guide them into the way of peace.

By the tender mercy of God, Jesus will come and meet us as we sit in our darkness. He will meet us in our fears, our doubts, and our anxieties. When we reach for his hands, one of his faithful servants will take us and hold us. When we see someone coming towards us as we sit in our grief, we will see that it is one of his faithful servants ready to embrace us. His touch comes through the faithful. Our ability to see him comes through others. It is what leads to the way of peace.

We define peace as being free from our enemies or our circumstances or our despair. Yet in both Luke 1 and 24 we learn that peace can come while we are still in the middle of our troubles.

Peace is not the absence of war. It is the absence of fear. It echoes the words of Psalm 23 – Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Peace is our path forward. In the *Gospel of John* Jesus assures us that he gives us a peace that the world cannot give and a peace that the world cannot take away.

It seems like a strange path to peace but God invites us not to wait for that sense of peace to come to us. Instead we need to walk into what troubles us and then with Christ next to us we need to walk towards the light. We need to walk through the valley and not just sit in the darkness. We need to walk through the shadow of death and not just lament over what could be.

Jesus going to the cross was the way God brought about this peace and so it becomes our path. His disciples walked away on that fateful Friday and understandably locked themselves in a room. Jesus came to them. Jesus provided words of comfort and assurance. At first they were still disbelieving and still wondering but then Jesus opened their minds so they could begin to see him more clearly. It was only when they were set free from their fears that they finally knew peace. Jesus helped them discover a path forward. And once they knew the path forward then they were commissioned to become witnesses.

Our challenge is to overcome our fears. Jesus is willing to come to us in our homes as we isolate until the virus is under control, in the streets where riots take place, with those who are ill, for those who are unemployed, and for those who are depressed and lonely. And we stand ready to hold them and embrace them and offer them a path to peace just from our presence.

I offer you an example of how powerful that sense of peace can be for those who seek it. It is hard to believe that we are coming up on the twentieth anniversary of 9/11. This story is about two women who became widows on that fateful day. In the days and weeks that followed they were overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and support they received. People came to them from all over the country as the hands and feet of Christ.

As they were being led out of their darkness and the shadow of their husbands' deaths, they learned about the women in Afghanistan who, when widowed, lost their status in society. The American women wanted to do something to help these other women who lived in constant fear. They raised money to form a foundation called *Beyond the 11th* to support Afghan widows. They made overseas visits to meet the women they were helping. When asked how they could do such a thing after experiencing such a tragedy, they responded that those connections helped them to make sense of the world. They believed God led them to a place where they could be at peace. Both women chose tolerance over hate and action over indifference. They were given an alternate lens through which to view their role in the world.

From Luke 1 – *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

It is still Easter! And may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen! Alleluia!