

Life-Giving Hands.

Text: John 20:19-23 for 4/4/2021

¹⁹ *On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"* ²⁰ *After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.* ²¹ *Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."* ²² *And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* ²³ *If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."*

She was getting ready to leave the coffee shop when she ran into a classmate she hadn't seen for years. It only took a few moments, and they were visiting as though no time had passed at all, until her friend asked, "So how's life?" Her mind raced trying to think of ways to deflect the question, because honestly her life was a mess. She was separated from her husband. She worked a job she hated. And although her kids never said it directly, she felt like they blamed her for all their marriage problems. That always made her time with them so uncomfortable. She was scared and angry. She felt trapped. This wasn't the life she had imagined. She dreamed about running away from it all, starting all over, and really living life.

Isn't that something we all want? Whether it's youthful idealism, a midlife crisis, or just being ready to retire and enjoy our golden years, we all go through those cycles of feeling like it's time to start *really* living. To feel like they are *really* living some people go backpacking through Europe. Some go motoring the Pacific Coast highway in a convertible or find themselves swinging in a hammock next to the beach. Some spend their golden years cruising the Mediterranean. They try to convince themselves that these adventures will help them *really* live. But when their feel-good trips are over, those same people return home to their same, old lives. Their souls are still feeling empty, and they are still wondering what it means to be *really* living.

The Bible has something to say about *really* living, and it doesn't involve a backpack, a convertible, a hammock, or a cruise ship. Christians don't need a midlife crisis or end-of-life burnout to trigger a life worth living. They just need Easter. They need the empty tomb. They need the happy shouts, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed." They need Jesus' appearance to the disciples in that locked room, showing them his **Life-Giving Hands**, and then explaining to them that Easter gives them a life *really* worth living.

The disciples behind those locked doors might as well have been the ones in that coffee shop, because they were acting like that woman whose life was a mess. John tells us **"the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews"** (v. 19). If the Jewish leaders were so underhanded and corrupt as to pull off the crucifixion of an innocent man, what would stop them from coming after his disciples next? Seventy-two hours earlier, they abandoned Jesus and ran from the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus was arrested. Peter disowned Jesus, just as Christ had predicted. And, despite the fact

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that Jesus had been preparing them for months for his approaching death, they still seemed genuinely shocked and surprised as they watched him die on the cross that Friday afternoon. They were acting like Jesus was permanently dead, and that their lives weren't worth living. They were afraid. They felt guilty. And they were trapped behind locked doors.

Knowing full well their anxious state of mind, Jesus wanted to calm their nerves and bring them peace. So, our Lord didn't start out by asking them, "How's life?" Instead, Jesus said, **"Peace be with you"** (v. 19). It was still Easter. They had seen the empty tomb. They heard the reports of the women and the Emmaus disciples, but they hadn't seen Jesus with their own eyes. They weren't completely sure what to make of the day's events. So Jesus came and stood among them, showing himself to be very much alive, and then gave his confused audience a moment to grasp the full meaning of his bodily presence. Having proclaimed peace to his disciples, the Gospel writer John tells us, **"After he said this, he showed them his hands"** (v. 20). Jesus' bodily presence, together with the sight of his life-giving hands convinced the disciples that they were looking at their resurrected Lord. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

And we have something just as convincing. We have the witness of the women, we have the words of the Emmaus disciples, and **"we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place"** (2 Peter 1:19). This world is a dark place. The effects of sin fill this world with doubts and disappointments, with guilt and grief, with pain, death, and despair. This world is so dark that it often makes us want to join the disciples trembling in fear behind those locked doors! On Good Friday, the whole world went dark when God laid on Christ the sins of us all; Jesus suffered the anguish of all the ugliness and darkness of this evil world.

But that was three days ago. It's Easter, and Christ is alive! It took them a moment, but the disciples finally grasped the meaning of Easter—it's joy! **"The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord"** (v. 20). Not sinful fear, but Easter joy makes life *really* worth living. Have you grasped the joy of Easter? The gloomy hopelessness of the world died on Good Friday, and so did the darkness of sin and all the nagging guilt that goes with it. Easter not only means joy, but peace because **"God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them"** (2 Corinthians 5:19). Through faith in Jesus we are brought back into that perfect, loving relationship with our heavenly Father. Jesus conquered sin. Christ defeated the devil. And then our triumphant Lord and Savior rose from the dead. He is alive! This Easter, grab hold of Jesus' life—his life makes your life *really* worth living. Along with Jesus, peace follows joy into your soul.

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The easy part of Jesus' visit is done. He showed himself to be alive. Yet, Jesus had more in mind that Easter evening than showing the disciples his life-giving hands. Easter peace and joy are not static things, not some private state of mind and soul without words or deeds that follow. Jesus went on to speak about how his life-fulfilling hands connect directly to our life-giving mission. **"Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you'"** (v. 21). The Father had sent Jesus from heaven on a mission to forgive sins, to redeem the world. Jesus didn't just hear the word of God, he did what his Father said! In the same way the Father sent Jesus, he now sends us. He takes disciples (followers) and transforms them into apostles (those who are sent out to proclaim). It's as the Apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians. Paul said of Christ, **"He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us"** (2 Corinthians 5:19,20). Serving as Christ's ambassadors! That's a life *really* worth living.

You get the feeling the disciples could have been overwhelmed by this. After all, within moments of Jesus' appearance, the disciples had gone from terror-filled hiding to Easter peace and joy, then they were commissioned and sent out into the world as Christ's ambassadors. But Jesus added that they wouldn't go alone. They would be serving with the power of the Holy Spirit. **"And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'"** (v. 22). What the disciples received was so much more than the Spirit-given gift of faith. The Holy Spirit empowers and enables each of us to carry out God's call, **"As the Father sent me, I'm sending you"** (v. 21).

And Jesus does even more, training the apostles in the message they would proclaim. He said, **"If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven"** (v. 23). It is a special day when parents hand over the keys to their car to their teenager. With these words, Jesus confidently hands every believer the keys to heaven. Forgiving sins or withholding forgiveness from those who are clearly impenitent is equivalent to opening and closing the door to heaven. The keys are the special power and privilege Christ gives only to Christians. Forgiving sins and announcing peace. That is what Jesus did on Easter when he showed the disciples his life-giving hands. What better way to live Easter every day than to use our hands for God's life-giving purpose—to forgive our brother and sisters. What can be more meaningful than forgiving the sins of my spouse? What can be more significant than reconciling my relationship with a coworker or a member at church? What could be more impactful than resolving differences with an old friend? Remember, keys are only valuable when you use them. So use them—that's why God gave them to you! Living at peace with God and your neighbor, that makes life *really* worth living.

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Those disciples thought they had nothing to live for. They acted like Jesus was forever dead. Then, miraculously, Jesus appears in their presence on Easter and shows them his life-giving hands. Then he sends them on his life-giving mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit with his forgiving keys. Today there are more than two billion Christians scattered around the world who owe a debt of gratitude to the church's humble beginnings that first Easter.

So, how's life treating you? Are you feeling stuck? Do you think you've got nothing to live for? Well ... stop acting like Jesus is dead because he's not! Look again at his life-giving hands. Those are the hands that paid for your sins and lifted your guilt off of you. Those are the hands that reunited you with the holy, and Almighty God. Those are the hands that wrapped a perfect robe of righteousness around your shoulders so that when God the Father looks at you he sees his own perfect child. Those are the hands that give you a new life now, and the hope of an eternal life to come.

Jesus is alive! So, let's start acting like it. Let's start praying like it. Let's start believing like it. Better yet, let's start living like it! Let's embrace his call, when he says, **"I am sending you"** (v. 21) and bring Jesus' gospel of peace and joy to the other five and half billion people in our world. Let's receive his Holy Spirit and use the keys to proclaim peace. Live life like there is no death because Easter means there is no death. That is why Easter makes life *really* worth living. Amen.