

*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!"<sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*

*<sup>21</sup> Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."<sup>22</sup> And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."*

*<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"*

*But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."*

*<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

*<sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"*

*<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

*<sup>30</sup> Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.*

*<sup>31</sup> But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:19-31)*

### **How Can We Have Peace?**

Do the holidays give you peace? Or do they churn you up inside? Maybe before you answer the question, I should ask a more fundamental one: what does peace feel like? If you have trouble describing it, maybe you haven't experienced very much of it. But at the same time, describing peace is kind of like describing heaven: it's easier to say what it is not than what it is. Peace is not having conflict. It's not tossing and turning all night because something's on your mind. It's not having your stomach churn. It's not being restless and unable to sit or concentrate or eat. Peace means that our heart is quiet. But if we don't have it right now, how do we get it? **How can we have peace?**

#### **I.**

Three times in our gospel lesson, Jesus says, **"Peace be with you."** Those words are more than just a greeting or a pious wish. They're Jesus' prayer for us and blessing to us. Jesus himself shows us the key to real peace. The first two times he said, **"Peace be with you,"** were on the evening of the first Easter Sunday. All day long the disciples had been hearing reports: the women had found the tomb open and angels had spoken to them and they claimed to have seen Jesus himself. The two disciples who were traveling to Emmaus reported walking and talking with Jesus. Peter himself reported seeing Jesus. Without a doubt, the disciples had gathered to discuss this and Luke tells us that they were beginning to believe it was true. Yet, John says that the doors were locked for fear of the Jews. The Jewish leaders had engineered Jesus' death. And the disciples were afraid that they were going to do the same thing to them.

It's funny how the human heart works. We can believe and doubt at the same time. The disciples' emotions were confused and what they felt at this moment was not peace. In middle of all that doubt and fear and confusion, Jesus appeared. He passed through walls and the locked doors and said, **"Peace be with you."** Again, Luke tells us just how incomplete their faith still was. They thought Jesus was a ghost. But he showed them his hands and his side. He let them touch him and he proved that he had a real, solid, living body.

Then Jesus said again, **"Peace be with you."** Jesus came to calm their troubled hearts. But his mission that day was more than just settling down a group of old friends during a time of crisis. He came to refocus them on their mission. Way back in the beginning, Jesus had promised to make them fishers of men. Now, he said to them, **"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."** Their mission was to bring peace to the world. They would spend the rest of their lives doing that. Almost every one of them would give their lives in the

cause of sharing peace. Not political peace, but spiritual peace – peace with God and then peace in our own hearts. Through their ministry, countless hearts would find the peace that surpasses all human understanding.

How could they complete a mission like that? How could anyone? Jesus symbolically breathed on them and said, **“Receive the Holy Spirit.”** Only by the work of the Holy Spirit can any pastor, teacher, missionary or apostle accomplish anything. We are weak and sinful human beings. Even the apostles were sinners. God the Holy Spirit did all the amazing things they did in the years to come. How did he work? Jesus said, **“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”**

These words are the heart and core of gospel ministry. Jesus gave us, his Church, the power to forgive sins. Usually, the pastor exercises that power for us especially in public settings, but the power does belong to all of us as the people of God. When we Christians forgive in Jesus’ name, it is as sure and certain in heaven as if Jesus himself stood here and forgave those sins. Now, does that surprise any of you? Probably not. Every Sunday, you hear me forgive your sins in Jesus’ name. We expect that. In Jesus’ time, this was a radical and surprising statement. Jesus’ enemies once muttered, **“Who can forgive sins but God alone?”** But you and I have come to expect this to be a part of the ministry of our congregation.

But the other part does surprise us today. If we refuse to forgive anyone they are not forgiven. We are sending them to hell. Why would we ever refuse to forgive anyone? That just doesn’t sound Christian does it? Remember who is speaking here: Christ himself – so it has to be Christian. Jesus is talking about something we call the ministry of the keys. Think of a ball and chain. It’s hard even to walk with that weight chained to your leg. Heaven help you if you try to go swimming. The ball at the end of the chain is your sin and guilt. It’s locked to your leg and every day it gets bigger and heavier. The ministry of the keys is the power to unlock that ball – to forgive your sins, or to refuse to unlock that chain, to leave you shackled to your guilt.

Again, why would we ever refuse to forgive you? Because you refuse to repent. When your sin tortures you, when you feel guilty and lost, God calls me to unlock you and set you free. But when you don’t care about your sin, when you treat sin as a little imperfection and say, “nobody’s perfect,” when you turn your sin around on me and get angry that I would dare to call you on it because I’m guilty of sins, too – in all those situations God calls me to lock that sin down on you even tighter. God calls me – indeed, God calls the entire Church – to declare to you that those sins are not forgiven and if you die without repenting, you will spend eternity in hell.

How do you think people respond when I say that to them? No one’s ever thanked me for it. In fact, they can get very angry. But the point is not to antagonize people and it’s not to claim that I’m better than you are or that we’re better than those people out there. We’re all sinners. The point is to lead people to repent and through that repentance to lead them to peace. Do you think a person who won’t confess their sins is at peace? They might think they are. But they’re not. Every day their conscience accuses them. They might get really good at plugging their ears. They might use all kinds of distractions and bad behavior to drown out the noise their conscience makes – drinking, sex, arguing, watching TV, gossiping – whatever. But their heart is not at peace. It is at war with God and with itself. The Bible says there is no peace for the wicked.

The only path to peace is through forgiveness. But you cannot forgive someone who won’t admit their sin. If you do, you make them think it’s OK to sin. God calls us to refuse to unlock the sins of people who won’t admit that their actions are sinful. We hope and pray that the shock of having your pastor tell you that you’re on the road to hell will make you stop and repent. As soon as you confess that sin, we forgive it. We repeat that forgiveness as often as it takes to give you peace. Now, hopefully, for most of us, it never comes to a dramatic confrontation. But all law and gospel preaching is using the keys. All true ministry seeks to give us peace by showing us our sin and then showing us Christ. **How can we have peace? Through the ministry of the keys.**

## II.

Jesus gave his disciples peace by showing them he lived. Then he sent them out to share that good news, that peace with the whole world by forgiving their sins – which is only possible because the Lord has risen. The very first opportunity they had to do that was with one of their own number: Thomas. Thomas wasn’t there on that first Sunday evening. So the other disciples told him, **“We have seen the Lord!”**

But Thomas didn’t believe them. Thomas was a twin – both his names, Thomas and Didymus, mean “twin.” He knew how easy it is to fool people. He didn’t want someone who looked like Jesus and talked like Jesus to trick him into believing that the impossible had happened. So he told them he would not believe unless he put his fingers in the nail prints in Jesus’ hand and put his hand into the wound from the spear in Jesus’ side.

Well, a week after Easter, Thomas got his chance. The disciples had gathered again. And Thomas was there. Suddenly, Jesus was there, too. He showed Thomas his hands and his side. Then Thomas confessed: **“My Lord and my God!”**

But Jesus doesn't praise him for that confession. He said, **“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”** There is a special blessing for people like us who hear the gospel and believe it. Now, that doesn't mean that we earn that blessing because we decided to believe. We did not decide to believe. The Holy Spirit called us by the gospel and gave us faith. He did that with no proof. That faith is the blessing. Jesus did not come and show us his hands and his side. We see them only in the Scriptures. But the power of God in the gospel reaches into our hearts and gives us faith.

John says, **“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”** The blessing is eternal life. That's what Jesus came here to give us. He died and he rose because we are sinners, because we do not want to admit our sins, because it's our nature to demand proof, just like Thomas did. Every Christian wrestles at times with how hard it is to accept all that God says. So much of it runs contrary to what we want to think and believe.

The mere fact that we think differently than God thinks proves our sin. If our hearts were perfect, they would always line up perfectly with what God says. But they aren't. So we are sinners. All our anxiety, all our worry, all our fear and doubt and anguish come to us because our hearts are not in perfect harmony with God's. They come because we're sinners living in a world that is contaminated with sin. But Jesus died to pay for every one of those sins. He rose to tell us that all that sin is forgiven and to promise us eternal life with him. Because he rose, we can have peace in our lives here and now.

Does that mean we won't be troubled by hardship here? No. We are going to feel sad sometimes. We are going to hurt sometimes. Because our faith is imperfect, we're even going to worry and wrestle sometimes. If our faith were perfect, we'd just entrust it all to God and go to sleep without a care in the world. But our faith is not perfect and sometimes all those worries do keep us up at night.

But the source of peace is the gospel because the gospel strengthens and purifies our faith. We don't need proof to strengthen our faith and we're not going to get any proof. Proof will come on the day Jesus returns. On that day even his enemies will worship him. But it won't be a joy for them. It will be part of their punishment. Between now and then, God doesn't give us proof; he gives us power. The gospel is his power to change our hearts. God comes to us again and again and he says that Jesus rose for us. He says that he will bring us to eternal life. He says that he will guide us through all the difficulties and sorrows of this life and he will use every one of them to keep us on the road to heaven. He will strengthen us every step of the way through the gospel, through the story of Jesus' life and death and life again for us. That message is the only source for faith. My friends, **how can we have peace? Through simple faith in Jesus.**

That's what God calls us to. We don't have to know all the answers. We don't have to be able to win arguments. We don't have to have proof. We need only the gospel. Through the gospel, God gives us faith. Through that faith, he gives us peace. In this life, that peace will not be perfect. The devil, sin, sorrows, the attacks of unbelievers – all these things will continue to trouble us. But each time we hear of Jesus' life and love for us, God is working to increase our faith. Each time God forgives our sins, God is working to make our faith stronger. The more our faith grows and matures, the more peace we have here. One day, the peace we have here will become the perfect peace of heaven. My friends, peace be with you. Amen.