

Sermon on Easter 3, on Peace, April 14, 2024

This story from St. Luke happens on the evening of Easter Day. Jesus has appeared to Mary Magdalene and several companions at dawn, he has appeared to Cleophas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, he's appeared to Simon Peter, and here they were all gathered and discussing these things when Jesus appears in their midst. And he says to them, "Peace be with you."

Peace. It's what all of us want in our lives, isn't it? Peace of mind, peace of heart, peace in our souls. And in both Luke and John's gospel, this is what Jesus offers his disciples, peace, Shalom. It is something he offers us, too.

So what is peace? Well, we think of it as an absence of war, violence, fighting, abuse, all those things, and that's a good start. We are praying for peace in Gaza right now and in the Middle East generally. And Ukraine, and Sudan, and Democratic Republic of Congo, and Haiti, and Myanmar, and so many other places where there is war. And then there are so many other countries where armed bands roam around attacking unsuspecting villages. Or where government paramilitary forces do the same. It's hard to feel much peace when you live in a war zone, or when you've fled a war zone and are living precariously in a refugee camp.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to live in a world where there was no war, no oppression, no violence? That's what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven and it's what we all long for and work for. But as long as human beings have freedom, and as long as people put profit or personal power first, we will continue to have wars and violence. Though of course we shouldn't throw up our hands in despair and stop working and praying for peace.

We are pretty fortunate in Canada. Our country is generally at peace and it is generally a place where there is law and order. Of course, there is still a lot of violence and abuse and poverty and bullying, sometimes pretty subtle. But it's better than many places in the world. And yet even when things go well, we don't always feel at peace.

Jesus offers us a different kind of peace, peace at a deep level, though his peace will lead to peace between people. He offers us peace of heart and soul. He offers us peace in the midst of the chaos around us. He tells us not to let our hearts be troubled, not to be afraid, to be at peace, and he gives us this peace. In St. John's gospel, almost as soon as he's said, "Peace" to them he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." It is God dwelling within us that gives us this peace, even in the face of violence, illness, death.

I'm sure you've known people who were wholly at peace with God and themselves, even though they were dying. Because they had God's peace. I meet them all the time, when I visit dying people. So often they look straight at me, with clear, untroubled eyes, and say, "No, I'm not afraid of dying." And they spend their last days spreading love and joy and peace to those around them, comforting those who are sad.

So how can we have this peace? Not just in dying but as we live our daily lives? There are some answers here in this passage. First, it is a gift of God that we are all offered. And when Jesus appears and offers this peace, the disciples first react by being afraid and thinking they're seeing a ghost. Their normal, immediate reaction to something unexpected, even seeing Jesus, is fear. And Jesus responds to that by naming it, first. "Why are you afraid?"

It's good for us, when we're frightened, to name our fears. Have you noticed that? When our hearts are full of anxiety, a good thing to do is ask, "What, exactly, am I afraid of?" I sometimes even ask, "What's the worst thing that can happen here?" And usually, it's not that bad. That helps. But all the memory of other fears and anxiety comes crowding in on me and increases my fear, even though there's no good reason for it. Naming it helps. Reduces it to size.

But mostly Jesus responds by just being with them. He lets them touch him. He asks for some food. He hangs out with them. He talks with them. It is in our day to day lives that Jesus walks with us, and his presence calms our fears. If we can bring ourselves to look, to reach out, we'll realise that Jesus is indeed with us, especially when we are gathered together in his name, as the disciples were that night. If we look, we can see Jesus in each other's eyes, and in each other's hands, reaching out to us. And we can feel his presence here among us.

The next thing Jesus does is open their minds to understand the Scriptures. You know, they had read those passages about the Messiah so many times. They probably had them memorized. But they'd always thought of them one way: the Messiah would come, raise an army, and drive out the Romans. And they'd never even considered looking at them any other way. But Jesus opens their minds so they can understand them differently, so they can put different passages together that hadn't been put together before, like the Messiah passages and the Suffering Servant passages, that show the Messiah is going to suffer and die. That was a new concept.

Jesus also opens our minds to understand the Scriptures, if we ask him to. And I have found in my own life that reading the Bible has been a really good source of peace for me. I sometimes read it in a scholarly way, studying commentaries and looking up the Greek words for things, and that helps me understand what it's saying. But I also read it devotionally, praying that God will speak to me through it. And you know, God does. When we ask, God helps us understand the Scriptures, not just in an academic way, but in a personal way: what does this passage have to say to me, today, here and now? What is it saying? What is it calling me to do?

When we read the Scriptures like that, prayerfully, expectantly, God so often gives us encouragement through their words. When I'm particularly sad or angry with God, I read the book of Job, or Psalm 42, one of my favourite psalms. Or Psalm 139, about how God knows me through and through and is always with me: there's no getting away from God. When I'm weary, I read Matthew 11, where Jesus says to come to him and he will give me rest. When I am feeling particularly useless because of mistakes I've made, I read about

the apostles or King David, and all the mistakes they made, and it gives me comfort. God still loved them. God still loves me.

Jesus then goes on to remind them that he came to forgive sins. St. John has a lot to say about this in his epistle today, and St. Peter in Acts. There's no better peace than having our sins forgiven. We don't have to keep dragging them around with us. God has forgiven us. Let go of them and leave them with God. Get up and start fresh.

And then he gives them a mission. He says they are here to witness to his life, teachings, death and resurrection and to offer resurrection life to everyone. Honestly, there's nothing like having some purpose in life to bring us some focus and peace of mind. When we have a goal, we don't worry about the small stuff. Think of athletes. They're too busy trying to win the gold medal or better their last time, to be too worried by the minor problems of daily life. If we are focussed on sharing God's love and the message of Jesus, then we are much more likely to forgive minor slights and keep moving. It's only when we have no purpose in life that we start to brood on all the little problems that beset us all and end up getting depressed and anxious and crabby.

Peace of mind and soul mostly rests in knowing we are God's beloved. God loves us as we are. We don't have to prove ourselves to God. We don't have to achieve some difficult task for God to love us, like those knights in old times who got sent on quests by their capricious lady love. We don't have to do anything in particular to make God love us. God already loves us. And if we can get that through our heads, really let it sink in that we are God's beloved, then we can relax about so many other things and be at peace.

Jesus gave us many gifts to help us on the way to peace. Perhaps the most important one is the community of the church. Did you notice that more often than not, he appears to his disciples when they're gathered? The first thing he does in his ministry is call some disciples to start forming the community. It's not an afterthought. It's central, the first thing he does. He promises to be with the church forever. He gives us sacraments to strengthen us. And these are found mostly in the community of the church. He doesn't abandon us when we're alone, but we are most aware of his presence in this community.

When we face difficult times, either alone or as a church, when we are feeling doubts and worries and fears for the future, worrying about whether we can cope, turn back to these things: to the Scriptures, to the Sacraments, to the loving community of the church. It is here we can find reassurance that God does indeed love us and besides loving us directly, also loves us through our siblings in Christ.

You have a time of uncertainty coming up, a time that might shake your sense of peace. Stick together. Love each other, forgive each other, read the Scriptures together, share the sacraments together, help each other, care for each other. And in doing these things, the peace of Christ will grow in you. Because even though I am leaving you and I will no longer be your priest, Jesus is not leaving you. The Spirit is not leaving you. Anything I've been able to do here has been by letting Jesus love you through me. It's not been me, it's been Jesus. And Jesus is still here. The church is still here. I am leaving you in good hands,

Folks. So don't be worried. Be at peace. Be filled with the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that carries us through, no matter what else we are facing.