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April 8, 2018

## PEACE BE WITH YOU

John 20: 19-29; Acts 4: 32-37

"The Peace of Christ be with you all; and also with you." Do we fully realize what we say when we say this to each other in worship?

Peace is an important word in our world today as it was in Jesus' day. Peace is something we all want more of, something we can never get enough of – Peace in our world, peace in our work place, peace in our community, peace in our family life, peace in our hearts. We can never get enough peace.

But peace is one of those things hard to come by and hard to hold on to. We may be fortunate to come to something like peace many times in our lives. But then something happens - a circumstance, an accident, a relationship, a financial situation, a health concern... and whatever peace we thought we had and did have just vanishes and we are in the wilderness trying to find our way again.

The fact that we are a globally digital age of 24/7 news doesn't help either. Even though there is so much beauty, fullness and joy experienced every day in our world, too often the news stories that grab the headlines are the bad stuff - the crises, accidents, conflicts and atrocities. Images imprint themselves in our brains and keep flooding our minds and hearts.

Some people think that peace is equivalent to the end of conflict, to solutions, resolutions, reconciliations and peace agreements. Peace is something that happens from the outside in. Once we come to a better place in our relationships at home or at work, with neighbours and friends, between racial or religious groups, in places of our world... once we find a way to manage our debts and agree on a plan of action... once we find the right treatment for a condition or once we deal with our affairs before our body or mind give out.... Once we do any of this we will find peace. So we want to believe.

And you know, there is a lot of truth to this. It's hard to feel peaceful inside when the world around us is in chaos and there's so much suffering. It's very hard, and especially if we are invested in it. To buy our peace at the expense of not caring... to buy our peace by tuning out or cutting off... this is no genuine way to peace, at least not in the Christian and biblical sense of that term. No. For peace to have something authentic and real to it, for peace to have something deep and enduring about it, something has to be experienced and felt inside. Peace is a spiritual reality within, and only then can it shape how we face the reality of life in the world on the outside.

Sometimes the outside events of life reveal to us how deeply we need greater peace within. But unless we then discover a deeper foundation for peace on the inside, we will have little with which to engage the outside in a way that is life-giving.

So how do we do that? How do we find greater peace on the inside so that we face our outside with greater compassion, grace, courage, integrity and generosity? How?

Let us meditate on our scripture readings this morning. Our gospel reading addresses the problem of finding peace and the way to peace very directly. What is the thing we have to tackle most if we are to find peace? FEAR. We are afraid of what is around us and our fear lives inside us. Our fear shapes our opinions, attitudes and priorities. Fear is the reason we do so many things that we do - in our relationships, with our finances, choices in our activities and areas of focus. When fear takes over we lose faith and suspicion grows. We lose our judgement and our perspective. We see others in very narrow ways and we see our options in narrow ways too.

In our gospel reading, Jesus' disciples are completely taken over by fear. They are hiding in a room with the doors locked. They're afraid that what happened to Jesus will happen to them if they're caught. They've totally lost their direction and purpose other than surviving moment by moment, day by day. They can't think straight, and they can't sleep. They are anxious and overwhelmed with stress, uncertainty and terror.

Does this sound familiar? Even if some of us can't quite match this scenario from our own life experience, why is it that we can feel something of what these people are going through? The reason is because we know something of what it feels like to be afraid, to be uncertain, to be full of questioning and doubt, lacking in direction and purpose, feeling overwhelmed with stress, the feeling of doors closing around us. We know something of this because it's part of human experience.

The disciples are totally overcome by fear. But then, something happens. Something happens that totally transforms them. They encounter Jesus again. And somehow, that encounter changes everything. How do we know? Our New Testament reading from Acts points to the same group of disciples just weeks later. Nothing has changed on the outside to make their lives easier, the authorities more lenient on them and the world more accepting of them. None of that has happened. All the change that has happened is on the inside. The change is in how they see, hear, smell, taste and touch. The change is in their imagination of possibility, direction and purpose. That's the change they begin to experience. Their openness and closeness with one another, their spontaneous generosity, their gratitude and even joy - nothing has changed on the outside and yet they are totally transformed in how they experience their lives and engage their world.

So what's happened? What is it about their encounter with the risen Christ that has transformed them? Well, somehow the word fear is replaced by another word, a very different word: "peace." Jesus says this to them: *Erinei emeen* - "Peace be with you"... He then gives them a new mission and purpose: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you..." He then breathes on them the Holy Spirit... And then a second time he says: *Erinei emeen* - Peace be with you... He gives them a focus for their mission and purpose: to forgive each other and to build relationships in community rooted in compassion, openness and understanding... And then a week later when Thomas is among them full of doubt, stress and fear himself, Jesus says it again a third time: *Erinei emeen* - Peace be with you.

I'm pronouncing the Greek because I believe it makes a difference to hear these words as they would be heard in the early church – The sound of the words is as important as the meaning. The spoken words intend to evoke an experience of peace. *Erinei emeen*... There are no jagged consonants. *Ereinei emeen* – it's what's called a breath prayer: breathe in "*Ereinei* (peace)" and breathe out "*emeen*" (be with you). We breathe in Jesus' peace spoken to us, and we breathe out his peace into the world around us.

With his peace, Jesus also breathes out something else. With his peace Jesus also breathes into us his Spirit, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is an energy, an energy that creates faith, resurrects hope and expands love. The Spirit is an energy that grows our confidence and serenity when facing new challenges.

Be it through worship, through prayer, through fellowship, through special relationships and experiences... however it happens, somehow, we are infused and awakened to something new in our relationship with the divine... And why not add something new to our spiritual practices. Why not pray Jesus' words, imagining Christ breathing them into us personally – "*Erinei emeen* – Peace be with you, Harris."

So, what effect can such a new opening to peace have in our lives?

We have already noted the effect of the peace of Christ on the first Christians within weeks of that first encounter. Before the resurrection they were steeped in fear and doubt, disillusioned, divided and scattered. Now, we read, they are of "one heart and soul." They are totally open to one another with all that they have, in spontaneous generosity and care for one another. Isn't this amazing? Imagine if the peace of Christ really lived in all people of the world in greater measure. What a different world it would be...

But let me stress again that such peace came alive in them even though nothing on the outside had changed. They were still living in a world that was hostile and suspicious toward them. They were still as vulnerable to being questioned and attacked as before. The peace of Christ they lived on the outside had to be something they experienced growing inside them despite anything that was happening on the outside.

OK preacher. That's fine and good. But what about us here today? What models of the peace of Christ can we find to inspire us here and now? Let me tell a story.

In August 2013, a 26 year-old international aid worker named Kayla Mueller, was captured by Isis while she was volunteering in a hospital run by Doctors without Borders in Syria. Her captivity lasted about 18 months. A year into her captivity she wrote a letter to her family which was smuggled out by friends. Let me quote parts of it:

"Everyone, if you are receiving this letter it means I am still detained... It's hard to know what to say. Please know that I am in a safe location, completely unharmed and healthy... I have been treated with the utmost respect and kindness. I wanted to write you all a well thought out letter but... just the thought of you all sends me into a fit of

tears. If you could say I have 'suffered' at all throughout this whole experience it is only in knowing how much suffering I have put you all through... I remember mom telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator because literally there was no one else... and by God and by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall. I have been shown in darkness, light and have learned that even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful. I have come to see that there is good in every situation, sometimes we just have to look for it. I pray each day that if nothing else, you have felt a certain closeness and surrender to God as well and have formed a bond of love and support amongst one another.... None of us could have known it would be this long but I know I am also fighting from my side in the ways I am able, and I have a lot of fight left inside me. I am not breaking down and I will not give in no matter how long it takes... Please be patient, give your pain to God.... Do not fear for me, continue to pray as will I and by God's will we will be together soon... All my everything, Kayla."

Kayla didn't make it out of captivity. She died in early 2015.... Nothing changed on the outside and in fact, things went from bad to worse. And yet, what this letter bears witness to is someone who is transformed from within in the very midst of a hopeless situation. How can we explain this? "*Erinei emeen* – Peace be with you... As the Father has sent me, so I send you... Receive the Holy Spirit... Peace be with you..." Kayla said it in her own words. But it is the same peace we are talking about... May we open ourselves to such peace and claim it for ourselves, especially as we live through our own life challenges. May we breathe in and breathe out the peace of Christ through all that comes our way.

Let us pray: We surrender ourselves to you, O God, all of us.... Come within us, O Holy Spirit... Give us your peace, O risen Christ.... Amen.