

April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023

## John 20:19-31 “Peace Be With You”

If you ever get the chance, ask any pastor what’s easier – officiating a wedding or officiating a funeral. And just so you know, this subject comes up a lot when you get a bunch of clergy together. Now, you’d *think* weddings would be easiest because there are, for the most part, smiling happy people gathered together to celebrate the beginning of a life-long partnership. There’s a lot of pomp and ceremony with friends and family showing their support for the folks getting married. There’s much celebrating, dancing and all sorts of merry-making following the service. Weddings can be a *lot* of fun. On the flip side, you’d *think* funerals would be harder to officiate. Even though many funerals these days are called celebrations of life, grief and sadness are always present no matter how much effort goes into making it a hope-filled event. Also with funerals, existing family tensions can get blown out of proportion because grief often disconnects people’s filters. But guess what gets the overwhelming majority of votes among clergy? Funerals! Funerals are *way* easier than weddings. With weddings there is a lot more preparation involved, but there’s also a bigger potential for overtly unfiltered drama. You’ve got Mother-in-laws who want to take control over every little detail. You’ve got brides who have meltdowns – what’s the term they use now? “Bridezilla?” Then there are the attendants – there’s all sorts of potential hazards there especially when it comes to toasting the bride or groom. Don’t get me wrong, there’s plenty of drama involved in funerals, but again ... when it comes to what’s easier, survey says – “funerals.”

Now ... you might be thinking, “Jesse, your son is getting married in six days. Is there something you’re trying to tell us here?” No. Planning is going great. There has been little to no “drama.” So far no fights, no tantrums, no unrealistic expectations or craziness. Yes, there are a lot of moving parts and a lot of planning that has taken place, but this has been a pretty great experience so far. Right? Anne, if you’re out there

listening type an affirmation in the comments to help set my mind at ease because you're the one dealing with all the nuts and bolts here.

I guess the point I'm trying to make here is that there can be a lot of mixed feelings that occur during a big, life-changing event. It doesn't matter if the event is meant to be joyful or sad. Both traumatic events *and* celebrations have the potential to bring out the worst in people, even to the point of relationships being damaged or even severed. Our lesson today takes place a week after Christ's resurrection. We see Easter as the most joyous occasion in the story of God's people. As I said last week, we are a church of the resurrection. Our hopes have been answered because Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed). You'd think this would be the case with Jesus' disciples too, but I want to re-visit this story that we consider every year regardless of what year we are in the lectionary.

This story picks up immediately where we left off last week. Mary had an encounter with the Risen Christ when she went to his tomb and found it empty. Jesus appeared to her and told her to go tell the disciples that she saw Jesus and that he will be ascending to the father soon. This week we have the disciples holed up in a house with the doors locked because they were afraid that the Jewish authorities would track them down and punish them for being Jesus' followers. All of a sudden, Jesus appeared among them (apparently the locks on the doors were ineffective deterrents for the Risen Christ!) Then Jesus greeted them by saying, "Peace be with you." That's the phrase I want to focus on this week. "Peace be with you." I know when it was my turn to preach at the ecumenical Lenten services this year, I emphasized that peace isn't the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice." But the actual quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. is, "True peace is not *merely* the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice." So yes, for true peace to take place, there must be justice. But according to King, the absence of tension can be and often is a part of the whole peace formula. That's where we go back to our original illustration about weddings and funerals and take note of how tension plays a part in how we react to any

given situation, whether it's joyful or traumatic. This was the case in the story of Jesus' first encounter with his apostles after his resurrection.

Have you ever been holed up in a house or a cabin with a bunch of other people? It doesn't matter if you're holed up because you've been snowed in or if you're there for a family reunion. There is always the potential for tension when you cram a lot of people in a house. Yes, these disciples who heard the news of Jesus' resurrection were probably happy, assuming they believed Mary's news, but they were also scared. They were dealing with some guilt over what led them to this situation. Yes, Jesus had been telling them over and over that it was inevitable that the chief priests and scribes would conspire to have him killed. But could they have done something about it if they had just paid attention to their surroundings? On the night that he washed his disciples' feet, he predicted that one of them would betray him, and that Peter would deny him. Later, he asked them to hold a prayer vigil with him in the garden of Gethsemane and they couldn't even stay awake for that. Then Judas, the betrayer, led a group of leaders from the Jewish High Council and their soldiers to that same garden to have Jesus arrested. That's when Peter drew a sword and tried to cut off the ear of one of the priest's slaves. While Jesus was put on trial before the Council, Peter denied he knew Jesus just as Jesus predicted he would. After the Chief Priests handed Jesus over to be tried by the Romans, John's doesn't mention where the apostles were during his trial, his sentencing or his execution. In fact, the apostles weren't mentioned again until after Jesus' burial when Mary came to tell them that his tomb was empty.

So here they were, holed up in a house behind a locked door feeling guilty and ashamed for betraying Jesus, instead of protecting him, or standing up for him, and not being around when he was tried and executed. But ... they had just received good news from Mary about Jesus' resurrection, so they were probably feeling some joy and hope too. They were experiencing the turmoil of mixed feelings. How appropriate it is that Jesus greeted them with the words, "peace be with you." All of a sudden, in this hidey hole of misery, shame and self-

loathing, there's Jesus, standing among them. The fact that it was impossible made it no less excruciatingly awkward. The fact that he was dead only made it all the more terrifying. Here was the victim of their failure back from the dead to deal with those who had turned their backs on him when he needed their support the most. But he's not mad. He is holding out his hands ... the hands that still bear the wounds of his crucifixion saying, "Peace be with you." Think about those words. These words are an act of forgiveness. In spite of the hurts and failures that had occurred between the men standing in that room, Jesus greeted them with peace and wellbeing.

Here's a question for you - Could you bring yourself to offer peace and wellbeing to someone who betrayed you and let you down as much as those disciples let Jesus down? I'm not sure I could. In fact, I'm pretty sure I couldn't. But if we're going to understand how extraordinary the forgiveness that Jesus offered was, that's where we have to go. Anybody see that special report on NBC nightly news last week about the young man who forgave his father's murderer? It was an amazing story. In 1998, Randal Bagley accidentally shot and killed Donald Mitchell during a robbery that the two were committing in Maryland. Twenty-four years later, Bagley asked for a sentence reduction. When Bagley appeared before the judge to make his appeal, Donald Mitchell's son Idris showed up to the courtroom and asked the judge to release him. After telling the judge about the wounds he suffered as a child because his father had been taken away from him, Idris turned to Bagley and said, "I fundamentally, wholly and wholeheartedly forgive you." Lester Holt, the nightly news anchor, brought the two together for the first time since last September when Idris spoke those words. It was an awkward meeting, but it was powerful. Idris again spoke words of forgiveness and wished Bagley well. There was no play-acting or pretense about this act of forgiveness. One of the common misunderstandings of forgiveness is that forgive and forget are the same thing; that when you forgive, you pretend as though the offense never happened. Not so in this case. And not so in the case of Jesus offering peace to his disciples. Jesus didn't appear to them hiding his wounds under a new pair of gloves and saying

“Hey, look, it was nothing. It doesn’t matter.” His wounds were right there out in the open for all to see. The gruesome consequences of the disciples leaving Jesus to his fate were not hidden or downplayed. They are the context and content of Jesus’ forgiveness.

“Peace be with you,” Jesus said. I’d be thinking, “I hope you all have some sleepless nights for the rest of your life for what you did to me, or should I say what you *didn’t* do for me.” But here’s Jesus wishing them peace of mind. Jesus offered deep, lasting, all-encompassing peace. The unimaginable, seemingly impossible extent of that forgiveness is a big part of the good news of the gospel - God is exactly what we see in the person of Jesus — outrageous, limitless, and gratuitous forgiveness, beyond anything we could ever imagine ourselves being able to do.

Here’s the trick though: We are not capable of accepting much more forgiveness than we give. It’s not that Jesus holds it back, its just that we won’t accept what we don’t believe in. Our capacity to accept forgiveness and to forgive others grow together and feeds off one another. The experience of being forgiven transforms us into increasingly forgiving people. This makes us less prone to repeating things that need forgiveness. Sometimes people ask me, “Why do we take communion every week? Doesn’t it become kind of stale after a while? Just another ritual we do every week because we’ve always done it?” Here’s why we do it: Our time at this table is a rehearsal for the forgiveness of those whose failures left us with the scars we now carry. We are reprogramming our responses to one another to make those responses more like Jesus. We are rehearsing the words and actions of forgiveness so that they might become true and we might become impossibly forgiving people. Practice makes perfect. This is the Lord’s table. Receive his forgiveness. Receive his Holy Spirit as the disciples received Jesus’ spirit that day. Jesus said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Peace be with you brothers and sisters.