

Sermon – “Peace Be With You”

Scripture: Psalm 118:14-29, John 20:19-31

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Rev. Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading revisits a Psalm of praise, of victory found in the Lord’s marvelous and surprising work. Hear now these words from Psalm 118, verses 14 through 29:

14 The Lord is my strength and my might; [the Lord] has become my salvation. **15** There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the Lord does valiantly; **16** the right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly." **17** I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord. **18** The Lord has punished me severely, but [God] did not give me over to death. **19** Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. **20** This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. **21** I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. **22** The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. **23** This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. **24** This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. **25** Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! **26** Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. **27** The Lord is God, and [God] has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. **28** You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. **29** O give thanks to the Lord, for [the Lord] is good, for [God's] steadfast love endures forever.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Our Gospel reading places us later on the very same day which we celebrated last week, the day of the resurrection. We join the disciples, who haven’t yet joined in the celebration with us, because at this point they are not mostly fully aware of what is going on; they have only a few strange reports that they don’t know what to make of. Listen now for the Word of the Lord to you in this reading from John 20:19-31.

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were 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 his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. **21** Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." **22** When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." **24** But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. **25** So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." **26** A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." **27** Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." **28** Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" **29** Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." **30** Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in

this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The title of the sermon: Peace Be With You

The text: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'"
John 20:21

This is the third time in three weeks we have heard words of Psalm 118. Much of this Psalm was in the lectionary selection for Palm Sunday; we found adapted language of this Psalm again in the responsive reading which together we spoke on Easter Sunday, and here once more we find it in the lectionary on the second Sunday of Easter.

We have thrice heard words of the LORD opening the gates that we might enter. We have thanked the LORD for steadfast love, and we have noted that "[t]he stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." "This is the LORD's doing," we have proclaimed, "it is marvelous in our eyes." We have announced that this "is the day that the LORD has made" and declared, "let us rejoice and be glad in it." Since these three weeks have spanned a roller coaster ride of situations in the Gospel narrative, it is interesting to consider how the same words may feel different in the very different circumstances of each of these moments in the Christ story.

Entering gates and giving thanks to the LORD has a natural connection to the Palm Sunday celebration, as does the Psalmist speaking of a festal procession and asserting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD". The high ranking officials in the house of the LORD have rejected this new teacher Jesus who does not fit into the expected shape, but here he comes, entering the city in defiant triumph, a multitude of disciples praising God and describing Jesus as a king. This rejected one is seen here by his followers as the needed cornerstone, the stone in the building process which, when seated in its proper place, will define the positioning of the entire structure.

And yet the confrontation set directly in motion by that entry to Jerusalem did not result in anything looking like victory, but in apparent defeat. Jesus was betrayed, tried, and executed. His followers were left scattered and afraid. In those moments, surely it no longer seemed that words such as this Psalm applied to Jesus at all. Rejoicing and thanksgiving, salvation arrived—all these hopes were cut short.

And then, in a scene we encountered last Sunday, the whole thing took a very strange turn. The tomb was found empty, perplexing all those who saw it. The women heard outlandish words from someone at the tomb about Jesus being risen, words which some of the disciples considered "an idle tale".¹

And while we, with the benefit of knowing all that followed, rightfully mark that morning, the first Easter, as a turning point on which all of history rests, and raise our voices in triumphant exultation, the disciples themselves did not experience the first Easter anything like we today celebrate it at all. Easter morning was to them a mystifying moment of fear and uncertainty into which a confusing

¹ See Luke 24:1-12.

hope had suddenly been injected. Reports, with few eyewitnesses, were of Christ missing, or with even fewer witnesses, possibly of Christ living, and everyone else remained in doubt and dismay. Those who saw an empty tomb found a sudden hope for... something; and according to John, there were at least two who believed, but there were none who understood.²

It is in that moment in the life of Jesus's followers that we meet them in today's Gospel reading from John. The scene we heard a few minutes ago takes place only hours later, on the night of Easter Sunday itself. And the scene described here is somewhat odd when set next to the Psalm we read. "There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous," declares the Psalm. But where do we find the disciples but hidden away, afraid, with the doors locked? This is no tent filled with the sound of glad songs of victory. This is a gathering of uncertain and doubtful disciples, afraid they will meet the same fate as Jesus, even as they debate what to make of the several accounts that his *ultimate* fate may somehow be different than it currently appears to be.

And through this locked gate comes Jesus, who appears in the room with them. Nothing is said about how he got there, only that he "came and stood among them," and that his first words to them were, "Peace be with you." He knows them, and he speaks directly to their troubled hearts: "Peace be with you."

"After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." Note that this is kind of an odd sequence. The disciples didn't rejoice when he appeared, apparently, or even when he spoke. The wording here implies that it was only after he showed them his hands and his side that they truly "saw the Lord," and it was then that they rejoiced. Besides being an interesting thing of note, this does become worth having noted a little bit later in the story. First of all, it fits with a common post-resurrection pattern of people not recognizing Jesus or being very unsure of him until he does something which opens their eyes to who he really is.³ Second, it is an important point of reference when we get to Thomas's experience of the risen Christ.

Poor Thomas! Not only did he miss out on this eye-opening occasion, he forever will be saddled with the word "doubting" as a part of the name by which he is known. That isn't incorrect, of course, for he did doubt—in fact, it is much stronger than doubt, it is named here as actual disbelief—but if we pay attention to the details we find that he did not demand any proof beyond what the other disciples had already apparently needed also. They had heard something from the women, after all, and mostly did not believe; they even had Jesus among them but did not, it seems, truly "see" him as real and the same Lord they had followed, and rejoice, until they had physically examined the marks of his crucifixion, the mark of the nails in his hands, and the pierced side.

Thomas is not unusual then among the disciples for reacting with disbelief and needing proof; he just is the only one left who hasn't already had that proof. Thankfully, and reassuringly to some of us, perhaps, Christ does meet him and show himself to him as well. A week later, a very similar scene plays out: a second time, disciples in a closed room, and Jesus "came and stood among them

² See John 20:1-10.

³ See John 20:11-17, John 20:19-20, Luke 24:13-35.

and said, ‘Peace be with you.’” Thomas, too, is shown his hands and his side this time, and he, too, believes.

Then comes the statement which we sometimes read as a criticism of Thomas: “Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’” It may be that this *is* something of an implicit criticism, but there are two things we should note about this statement by Jesus. First, the word “blessed” in English probably has a lot stronger hint of meaning “favored by God” than it does here in Greek, the language in which John was originally written. There is another Greek word also translated sometimes as “blessed” that has a stronger sense of meaning “praise-worthy” or “honored by God”, whereas the Greek word used here in the original text to speak of “those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” is often used to mean something closer to merely “happy” or “fortunate”. It could, maybe, have been translated as “Happy are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”⁴

Second, it is important to recognize that the distinction Jesus makes between one who has seen and “those who have not seen” is not a division between Thomas and the other disciples. The other disciples, as we’ve already established, came to believe *after* seeing just as Thomas did. In fact, this is a slightly puzzling statement when Jesus makes it, because there is literally nobody we’re aware of so far in the Gospel account who has come to believe without having seen at least some sign of the resurrection with his or her own eyes.

Who the ones are who believe without seeing only becomes somewhat clear in the next paragraph, where the author of the book of John breaks out of the narrative to speak directly to the reader. “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” John pulls out of the narration briefly to explicitly make a connection between Jesus’s statement and you and me. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” he said. John acknowledges that “those who have not seen” include us, the readers of this account, and also points out that we are among those who yet may believe. He wants us to be among the happy, blessed ones whom Jesus has just described.

This sounds nice, but we also need to remember that it is an odd blessedness, from a worldly perspective, that we gain with Christ. Remember the Sermon on the Mount? “Blessed”—and yes, it is the same word for “blessed” as appears in today’s reading—“blessed” are “the poor in spirit,” “those who mourn,” “the meek,” “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” “the merciful,” “the pure in heart,” “the peacemakers,” “those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” and “you,” “when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on [Jesus’s] account.”⁵ Those aren’t all situations we tend to think of as fortunate, happy, or blessed, but Jesus doesn’t think about it as we usually do.

Which brings us back to the particular “blessing” Jesus gives his disciples in our reading today. What is the one thing he repeats over and over again in today’s reading? “Peace be with you.” He

⁴ The contrast is between μακάριος (makarios), used in this passage (“blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”), and εὐλογέω (eulogeo), found in passages such as Matthew 21:9 (“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,” referring to Jesus in his triumphant entry to Jerusalem).

⁵ From Matthew 5:1-11 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

says it to them three times. Why does he say it? Maybe it is because they need it. Easter finds them troubled, confused, and afraid. They have followed him, and it has brought them into danger. They come in this moment, in his revelation of his resurrected self, to have their belief restored; and they will continue to follow him, and it will bring them into more danger.

Jesus surely knows this. When he says to them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” this isn’t an idle or abstract commission. Consider what the Father sent him to: the cross. And that is, in fact, exactly where nearly all of the persons in this locked room on Easter evening later went themselves, nearly all meeting violent death for the sake of the Gospel, several quite literally dying on a cross themselves.

Thankfully, the Father also sent Jesus *beyond* death, to life and victory, and there also Jesus sends his disciples, those who have seen, and those who have not seen also, that they may all have life in his name.

Our Psalm tells us of songs of victory. It is not the same victory that the people thought they were to see when Jesus entered Jerusalem in that processional we remembered back on Palm Sunday, but it is nevertheless victory, and a greater one at that. Not a victory over Rome, a victory over death itself. The cornerstone turns out to orient the whole building in a different direction than even his followers expected, and not just deliverance of a single nation but worldwide salvation and eternal life are built upon it.

So with the Psalmist we must say, “[G]ive thanks to the LORD, for [the LORD] is good, for [God’s] steadfast love endures forever.” And with the disciples we listen to hear our own commission, our own calling, knowing that it too involves a cross, but with them also knowing now that the cross is, in the end, the means not to death but to life. The anxious fear that bids us lock ourselves in a room and hide is no match for the peace given by the Prince of Peace himself. For when Jesus said it he spoke it with the authority of the Son of God: “Peace be with you.” Amen.