

# Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

## Peace Be With You

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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.'<sup>20</sup> After Jesus said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'<sup>22</sup> When Jesus had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> 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<sup>\*</sup>), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But Thomas 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 Jesus' 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.'<sup>27</sup> Then Jesus 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.'<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe<sup>\*</sup> that Jesus is the Messiah,<sup>\*</sup> the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. -- John 20: 19-31

*Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, if we are honest with ourselves and with you, we will admit that some of us have been through tough times. Some of us have lost jobs, lost loved ones, lost our direction, and have tried under the worst of circumstances not to lose our faith. Wherever we are this morning, whether we are experiencing a gentle breeze or a blustery storm in the winds of life, help us believe that even when we are afraid we can't hang onto you, You never let us go. To that end, O God, I pray that you might pour through me the gift of preaching, that my words might, by your grace, become your Word for us this day. It is in the name of Jesus, the Risen and Reigning Christ that we pray. Amen.*

"Goodbye." "See you later," "Adios Amigo," "God be with you," these are all ways people say goodbye, until they meet again.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said goodbye to his disciples as well, in what theologians call the "farewell discourses." Since Jesus knew he was going to die, he helped his disciples prepare for it, but like all of us, who is ever ready to say goodbye when someone we love dies? And

what is there really to say anyway, except God be with you until we meet again?

Words of goodbye assume that you will see the person again. "See you later, alligator, after awhile crocodile. See you soon, raccoon. Bye, bye butterfly." We teach our children these simple phrases to deal with separation anxiety, but for all of us, death is the ultimate question of whether we will see our loved ones again in any recognizable

form. Will we be reunited with those we love? Will we share eternity together?

Jesus knew his disciples might have the same anxiety and so he prepared them for his death. We could say, he got his house in order. Let us rewind the clock a few days, and see what Jesus said to reassure his disciples that they would meet again. After washing the disciples' feet and giving them a new commandment to love one another, Jesus says: "let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms, if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." (Jn 14:1-3).

When I am called to visit someone in the hospital who is about to die, I never know what is going to happen. Usually the subject turns to death. Once everyone else leaves the room, especially family members and nurses, the patient wants to make sure that they have the right directions so that there will be no question about their final destination. The first of these conversations happened when I was in seminary, and caught me quite off guard. My own grandmother said, "I just want to go through this one more time, what will I face on the other side of death?" Now you must understand that my grandmother was the daughter of a Baptist minister, one of eight children, and had endured so much church and fire and brimstone as a child that she married a Presbyterian bank teller in her mid-twenties and in her late 80's came to church only when I preached, which was rare indeed. Even my grandmother, who kept a New Testament by her bed and thought she had had enough church in the first twelve years of her life to last a life

time, asked one last time, what will I face after death?

I wish I could tell you that I picked up her New Testament and leaned on the strong arms of Scripture. The truth is I paraphrased it the best I could. "Jesus is going to come and take you to himself so that where he is you may be also." She looked genuinely relieved, and sighed: "that makes sense. God puts us into the world one at a time, I guess. He will take us out of here in the same way. So, Jesus is going to come pick me up himself, huh, that's a relief. Is he coming on a white horse, I seem to remember a white horse." "I am not sure about the white horse, Ama, but I know you will know who he is, and you will have a place all prepared for you in heaven, Christ promises it is true." Within a few days, my grandmother died. I realized then that I had better brush up on my pastoral skills around death and dying. Like those dying, I wanted to be prepared.

In John's gospel story this morning, we pick up the story during those precious few days between the death and burial of a loved one. It is always disorienting time when shock, sadness, grief, and reality collide. Scripture tells us that the disciples gathered together on Sunday night. They were devastated that their Lord had died, afraid that they might be imprisoned by the same people who had arrested Jesus, and shocked by Mary Magdalene's tale that Jesus' body was missing from the tomb when she went to anoint his body. To make matters worse, she had concocted some crazy story about a gardener that looked like Jesus or had become Jesus or that she confused as Jesus. What was going on? Huddled together, perhaps in the same upper room where Jesus had celebrated the Last Supper with them just a few days before, they tried to make sense out of the nonsense of the last few days. It has been quite a roller coaster ride.

From that day on the road to Jerusalem where people waved palms and shouted “Hosanna,” to the Last Supper, the arrest, and the crucifixion, they had been on emotional overload.

The disciples, who had scattered after Jesus’ arrest, now found comfort in being together. They were all there. Well, not Judas, the betrayer. And not Thomas, who decided he’d rather be alone, but the others were there. They were grieving and horrified at the thought that someone had stolen the body from the tomb. They sat telling stories and trying to piece back together their lives that had been shattered when, something completely unexpected happened. Jesus came and stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you.” The Scripture tells us that the doors were locked, but Jesus still managed to get in. He greeted them with the blessing: “Peace be with you.” In Hebrew, “shalom aleichem.”

When they couldn’t believe their eyes, Jesus showed them the nail marks in his hands and feet, and said again: “Peace be with you.” Thomas who was not there, on the first visit, swore they must be mistaken. In fact, he Thomas said, “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.” A week later, the disciples were back in the same room, and the doors were closed. This time Thomas was there. Again, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said: “Peace be with you.” Shalom aleichem.

Jesus repeats the blessing: “Peace be with you,” three times. Within eight short verses, he says Shalom aleichem three times. What does it mean, and why is this the final blessing that Jesus means for his disciples and for us some two thousand years later? What does Jesus mean when he says, “peace

be with you?” In John 14: 27, when Jesus closes out his farewell discourse to the disciples, he speaks of peace or shalom as his final gift to the disciples. After assuring them that he will send the Holy Spirit to be with them and to guide them when he dies, Jesus says: “peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

Jesus is saying that his peace is different from the world’s peace. We often think of peace as the absence of war or conflict. Christ’s peace is much more. Christ’s peace is shalom, which is an Old Testament concept that doesn’t adequately translate into the English word for peace. We think of peace being the symbol of the dove or the olive branch, but shalom is far more expansive. In seven short words shalom means: “*the way things are supposed to be.*” Shalom aleichem, “may things be the way they are supposed to be.”

As theologian Neil Plantinga puts it: “Shalom is the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight.”<sup>ii</sup> While every prophet and theologian paints a slightly different picture of the New Jerusalem, most agree that in today’s language: all parents would get along, and children would play safely in parks. There would be no need for burglar alarms or car alarms, or airport security checks in schools. All children would be picked at recess for a team, all parents would find time to attend their children’s games and matches and recitals, and all of life would slow down dramatically. Bosses would encourage their employees and spend a considerable amount of time to make sure that their colleagues thrived and succeeded. There would be genuine camaraderie at work, and people would compliment each other behind their

backs. The national stress level would come down a few hundred notches, and people would breathe deeply believing that there was plenty of time for what is truly important. Call it paradise or Jerusalem or the New Eden or God's Vision. The Bible calls it Shalom, in other words, *this is the way that things are supposed to be.*

As I look out this morning, in many of your faces I see exhaustion and worry. Isn't God speaking to us directly: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (Jn 14: 27).

We all respond differently to worry and exhaustion. Some of us feel closest to God when we are anxious. Others feel that God has abandoned them when they are pushed to their limits. Be very sure of Scripture's promises *we might not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future.*<sup>iii</sup> That is the message of Easter; that is the message of the Risen Christ. Jesus Christ holds our future safely in his hands. Peace be with you, shalom aleichem.

So when the storm clouds gather, even when you feel the winds of change around you, shalom aleichem, peace be with you. For some of us, there is a gentle breeze blowing in our lives right now, for others, it feels more like a brisk wind, and still for others we feel like we are in hurricane season. Hear Christ's blessing coming down through the centuries. And may it be your blessing as well: Shalom aleichem. Peace be with you.

This blessing is for you **if** you will receive it. Let go of the past and make the future the way it is supposed to be.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jan Zeman, "Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop," as quoted from the internet.

<sup>ii</sup> Neil Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>iii</sup> Shirly Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, his chapter on the resurrection is superb.