

John 20:19-31

## **Put Peace into Each Other's Hands**

We do it every Sunday. That moment in the service when I share a little statement about peace and then invite you to turn and share a sign of peace with one another. But do we really consider what a profound exchange that is? Our experience of Covid and our continued awareness of how colds and flues are spread has many hesitant to shake hands or embrace, yet that should not, nor does it negate the intimacy that is available to us in looking one another in the eye as we share a sign of peace.

Many years back in my home congregation, we would share the sign of peace with one another early in the service. There was one member of the congregation would not come into worship until that was done. Though I really got along with the woman, she did not want to shake hands with people with whom she was not that crazy about and so chose not to participate in that part of the worship. Even then, I thought there was something amiss with that choice.

It reminded me of when I learned that my grandfather would not take communion because he thought he had to be completely right with the world, and the people he dealt with in it, to be able to take communion. In both cases, the woman and my grandfather had missed the point. They missed out on the peace that was offered to them through Christ. They erred on the side of judgement, the judgement of people and God's judgement, rather than on the side of grace.

One of the key passages for me around grace is this one from the Gospel of John where Jesus greets his disciples in those first resurrection appearances. No less than three times he says to them, "Peace be with you." Now remember, this is what Jesus chooses to say to those who are gathered in a place where the doors are locked because they fear for their lives. They don't know whether or not the authorities who sought to end Jesus' life are now going to come after them as well and quash anyone connected with Jesus. In this group is Peter who denied Jesus three times and all those who scattered as the events unfolded, from the arrest, to the trial, to the crucifixion.

These were the people, both men and women, who had been with Jesus for his three years of ministry, some may have known him longer. None of them had expected the events of the last few days. They had thought that Jesus would truly be king of the Jews, but in the most worldly way they could imagine, a king coming in power and might to overthrow an oppressive government. They imagined Jesus on a mighty steed leading an army, not a leader who would die a shameful death on a cross.

One may be able to imagine how stunned they must have been, the shock, the horror, the disappointment, the grief over the loss of their beloved leader and teacher, and the loss of hope for a future hope of glory and freedom. They had invested their time and energy in this Jesus; they had allowed themselves to be hope filled and to love this man and now they were huddled and sequestered together in fear and in grief. That is all but Thomas.

We are not sure what Thomas was up to, but he was not with them. Who knows with Thomas. He was always one to say something. Earlier in John's gospel it was Thomas who was willing to go with Jesus to Judea when they had heard that Lazarus was ill and later had died. A trip to Judea was to travel dangerously as this was a place where people had tried to stone Jesus to death and he got away. Now he was willing to head back into that scenario in order to be with his friends Mary and Martha and Thomas said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with [Jesus]."<sup>1</sup> And they did go.

Later on in John Chapter 14 Jesus talked about going ahead of them and preparing dwelling places for them and says to them they will know the way to the place where he is going. Thomas, however, very plainly and practically said to him, Hello... "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Thomas is the practical one, the straightforward one. And in this moment when everyone else is hiding in fear, he is nowhere in sight. One can only imagine what Thomas might have been up to. He was so practical that he might have gone out to search for Jesus as Mary Magdalene had already let them know that she had seen the Lord. He may have decided that fear be damned, it was not going to keep him from whatever else life had in store for him. We simply cannot know why Thomas was not there, but we do know that he missed the moment when Jesus came to the gathered group, stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." His first words to those who had deserted him, who had disappointed him, who had loved him but failed him, were "Peace be with you."

What a moment of grace! He then showed them his hands and his side. How interesting it is that Jesus' resurrected body was not a perfect body, it was a healed body, yet his body still had the scars that proved what he had endured and that it truly was him, not some apparition. The disciples rejoiced! It would take a while, likely their entire lifetimes to sort out everything they had experienced in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but in this moment, it didn't matter how much they understood. They just knew that things were different and that the one they had put heart and soul into was alive. He was there with them.

Well, he was with all but Thomas. And though Thomas has been harshly nick-named doubting Thomas, maybe it was more than that. Maybe it was that Thomas was just that

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practical questioning guy who needed to have his questions answered and it was going to take more than his companion's word for it. Besides wouldn't any of us want the same amazing experience that the others had had. So, Thomas says, nope, I won't believe until I too "have seen the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in [Jesus'] side."

And Jesus does show up again. He doesn't say to Thomas, well don't you have high expectations, or chastise Thomas for saying what he said, or perhaps, for not having faith enough to believe his friends. Jesus, even though the doors are still shut, shows up a week later and stood among them. The first words he says, "Peace be with you. Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.'"

Jesus was not angry; he offered even more grace to Thomas. We are not told whether or not Thomas actually did touch the wounds, but I can't imagine that he would not have and even more, embraced Jesus.

Talk about moments of grace. Jesus kept meeting people where they were at, physically and emotionally. He met Mary in the garden where the tomb had lain open as she deeply grieved him. He met the disciples behind locked doors of fear, confusion, and grief, and he met Thomas with his questions and demands, even when everyone else had tried to convince him that they already seen Jesus.

Jesus did not condemn, did not say harsh words, did not put them in their place, he just came and said, "Peace be with you." This is why I think that the woman in my home church and my grandfather had it wrong. Christ offers peace, not judgement. It is the gift we have for one another. It is the gift we offer in that short statement where we share a sign of peace.

Sharing the sign of peace with one another in worship is not just another way to say hello to each other. I often think that is what we have reduced it to. To share a sign of Christ's peace with one another is to look at the person you are greeting, the person you are looking in the face and praying for the kind of peace that that person needs in their life where they are at in this time.

We cannot know what each other is going through, but in the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through each of us and the church, we can offer Christ's peace to one another. It may be the words one needs to hear knowing that Christ shows up for each and every one of us, where we are at physically, emotionally, and mentally. Jesus doesn't wait for us to be perfect people. Jesus comes to us where we are and uses us as we are.

Jesus uses us to respond to the needs of others, to restore people to wholeness. Jesus rejoices with us as we rejoice with one another as people who come together and share our lives as Christians in community, the community of the church and in the broadest sense of community.

This deep peace was something that Jesus promises before his death in Chapter 14 of the Gospel of John where he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (v27)

This peace was not a new thing, it just felt different now. Now they could understand more fully and to the core of their being what Jesus meant by his peace. It is a peace that, as it says in Philippians 4:7, "...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"

This is the peace that Jesus offers us and it is the peace that we offer each other at each service. It can be the peace that we offer each time we greet each other, here or elsewhere. It is the kind of peace that meets you where you are at, peace that sees you for who you are and loves you anyway. Peace that surpasses all understanding. Truly I say to you today, "Peace be with you."

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.