

## John 20:19-23

It was Easter Sunday evening. It had been quite a day for the followers of Jesus. A number of them had reported seeing Him alive- risen from the dead. Now they were gathered together. The doors where they met were locked because they were afraid of the Jews. They feared that those who killed Jesus would now come after them. Suddenly Jesus stood in the midst of them. He didn't sneak in by some back door. He didn't climb in through a window or seep through the wall like some spook. With His resurrected, glorified body He could be wherever He chose. Notice, He didn't come as a ghost. A ghost doesn't have flesh and blood. He invited His disciples to see the mark of the nails on His hands and the mark of the spear on His side. Another Gospel says that He invited them to touch Him and He ate before them. There was no doubt that it was Jesus and that He had bodily arisen from the dead.

What do you think His first words to His assembled disciple were? I could imagine Him saying, "You cowards, why did you desert me?" or "Why didn't you believe that I would arise from the dead? I told you this would happen?" No, His first words were, "Peace be to you." He came as God's messenger to say, "Peace be to you." Jesus had worked to make peace between God and mankind. That was the purpose for His coming into the world. That was the purpose for His life and death. He represented sinners before God. He suffered the punishment for their sins. As the Bible puts it, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

Think about it. People had offended God. Your sins, my sins were acts of hateful rebellion against God. Already at birth we were guilty and condemned. We should have made our peace with God. We owed Him. But we were not willing nor did we have the ability to make peace with Him. So what did God do? He did something that even amazes the angels. He had pity on us sinners and He gave His dear Son to make our peace with Him. The Gospel says to all mankind, "Peace to you. God is not angry with you any longer. Jesus has made your peace."

St. John wrote, "The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."

I was only a boy when the Second World War ended but I recall pictures and remember hearing of the celebrations. There was the ringing of church bells and dancing in the streets when people heard the good news that this horrible war that took millions of lives was finally over and the country was at last at peace. If peace among nations can bring such joy, what about peace with God? Peace be to you from God means you no longer need fear death and hell. As for death, it has lost its hold over you. You will arise as Jesus arose and as for hell; your punishment for sin has been suffered; it has no claim on you.. Your guilt-ridden, fearful, heart can now be at peace. Peace to you from God in heaven. As an Easter hymn puts it, "The strife is o'er, the battle done; now is the victor's triumph won; now be the song of praise begun. Alleluia!"

After assuring His disciples of peace with God, Jesus told them to go and publish the message of peace. We read, "Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the father sent Me, I am sending you." Once again Jesus gave them His peace but this time that peace was theirs to share. The Father sent His Son to make peace. Then He sent the Son to declare peace. Now the disciples were to go to their fellow human beings and tell them that God was also at peace with them. Christians have the best job on earth. The Prophet

Isaiah wrote, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation.

I remember something else about the Second World War. Years after the war was over. On some deserted island in the Pacific they found a Japanese soldier who had been left behind. He had spent years away from home, deprived of his family, living in fear. No one had told him the war was over.

There are poor sinners that still do not know that God has declared peace between them and Himself. The terrified, guilt filled sinner can hear no sweeter words than, "Peace be to you." Christians have been given the privilege of telling them.

St. John relates, "And with that He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The Lord commissioned His Christians to represent Him in publishing peace. They were inaugurated into the office of being His messengers of peace.

Please take note of the fact that Jesus was not only speaking to the 10 apostles. There were other people in the room that evening. In the great Gospel command- the command to preach the Gospel, all Christians, young and old, male and female were commissioned to publish peace.

Jesus elaborates on how to go about publishing peace, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. During His ministry Jesus said similar words, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

People ask, 'How can a human being forgive sins? Only God can forgive. God indeed has worked forgiveness for all people by his Son. It is His forgiveness. However, He sends His Christians to distribute His forgiveness. When they tell someone their sins are forgiven, they do so with the authority God has given them. So when they say, "Your sins are forgiven," it is God speaking through them.

Imagine the sinner hearing the announcement of forgiveness but thinking, "Well, that is what you, a fellow sinner, is saying but how do I know that this is true?" Jesus says, "I stand behind the announcement of forgiveness even though it is spoken by another human being. That forgiveness, as the Catechism states, "is as valid and certain in heaven as if Christ our Dear Lord dealt with us Himself."

Notice that the Lord also says, "If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. If a Christian should say to an unrepentant sinner, someone who wants to go one living in his sins, "You are not forgiven, "that person should tremble in terror for the Lord is speaking.. Though the judgment is spoken by a mere mortal, it is also the statement of God in heaven.

The use of the keys, the forgiving and retaining of sins, cannot be used according to the whims of the speaker. Those who speak are representatives of Christ. Words spoken contrary to the will of Christ mean nothing. A Christian dare not withhold forgiveness from those who sorrow over their sins; neither dare he forgive the sins of someone intent on living in wickedness.

Now, how shall we apply these truths? When we have sinned and confessed our sin and a brother or sister in Christ tells us we are forgiven we should receive that forgiveness as if Christ were speaking to us.

When our child sins, we might have to discipline, but our dealing with this little brother or sister in Christ must not stop there. We will also say, "Jesus forgives you and I

also forgive you.” And when a fellow church member has sinned and confesses his or her sin to us, we must not hold a grudge or put him on probation but rather announce forgiveness.

The work of the church is to publish peace. That is why we call a pastor. He in our name publicly publishes peace. That is why we have banded together as a congregation, why we have a church building, Sunday services, a Sunday school, and the various types of Christian education. That is why we are united as a church body called the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The name evangelical means that this is a church that publishes the good news of peace.

Finally that is why we exist on this earth. As we have received peace from Christ, we are called to publish that peace to others. Amen.