

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, April 11, 2021

PEACE BE WITH YOU

John 20:19 (RSV)

“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”

Jerusalem had been filled with rumors the crucified Christ had been raised from the dead, and had been seen alive.

“Some of His disciples have stolen His body,” sneered the skeptics. “Raised from the dead, indeed! There is no length to which these fanatics will not go, to gain an audience for their teachings.”

If skeptics could have seen those fanatics! There they were, cowering behind closed doors—thoroughly demoralized, totally defeated, feeling utterly humiliated. They had put their faith in Him. Now He was dead.

Oh, they had heard testimony of the women. The body had disappeared. Who could have desecrated that sacred tomb? Yes, Mary Magdalene, Peter and Andrew were ready to go back to their father’s boats to resume their trade as fishermen. Levi was perplexed. He had been a despised tax collector. How could he go back to that life, after walking nearly three years with Jesus? Others had not thought that far in advance. They only feared the present moment. Rumor had it Jewish authorities would next be coming for them. There they were—locked away behind closed doors, trembling with every sound. They were more like frightened children that night than fanatical zealots.

Suddenly, in the midst of their confused and doubting perplexity, stood Jesus. He was no longer in the grave. He was in the room with them. The testimony of women had not been an idle tale. There were scars in His hand, His feet, His side. He was alive!

Whether they touched Him or not, we do not know. They might have done so. But they were overjoyed. They were too glad to believe! They were full of wonder. The sight of Jesus was terrific. Could it all be a dream? No, it was real—more than anything they had ever experienced. He was alive!

At this point, Jesus delivered the first Easter sermon. The first Easter sermon was delivered to that fearful group gathered behind locked doors on the evening of that first Easter day. The first four words of that sermon are important to our fearful hearts as well.

The first four words were these: "Peace be with you." That was Jesus' primary message to them.

It is said that Dante, wandering one day over the mountains, drew near to a secluded monastery. He knocked at the gate. It was opened by a monk. "What do you seek here?" the monk asked. Then with a gesture of despair, the poet summed it up in one word: "Peace."

Peace—that is a prized commodity in any age. Peace for our hearts, our families, and our world. Those were the first four words of the first Easter sermon: "Peace be with you."

Peace concerning Jesus Himself. That is why churches bulge on Easter Sunday morning. In every heart—regardless of how neglectful of God the rest of the year—there is longing to be reassured the great good news of Easter is really true. He is alive. He has conquered death.

We know that He is alive because of change that occurred in the lives of His disciples. He unlocked not only the doors of their room that night—He unlocked the doors of their hearts and minds. They became what they never dreamed they could be. Just as we may not be able to see the wind, but can see its impact on trees, so we see the effect of the risen Christ on those down-hearted, and thoroughly defeated men.

He can have the same effect on our lives—if we let Him. The tragedy of our lives is that many of us want to have simply a casual relationship with Christ. We want to know Christ is there—just in case we have an emergency—but we do not want to share our lives with Him.

Ernest A. Fitzgerald tells about a plow sent to Africa some years ago. It fell into the hands of a primitive tribe in the interior of the continent. The people had never seen such an instrument before. Not knowing what to do with it, they set it up in their fields, and worshipped it. Each day they would interrupt their work for prayers. The plow, of course, was designed to cultivate soil, and provide food. However, instead of being used as a means of deliverance for the people, it became an added burden in their lives.

For many, that is where our faith stands. We believe with our heads that Christ is alive, but He does not live in our hearts. We miss the joy of resurrected living. We are like those disciples with curtains drawn, and doors barred—living troubled and uncertain lives. It is to us Christ speaks those words--"Peace be with you."

Those first disciples did not remain disciples. After they experienced the risen Christ, they became apostles. A disciple sits at the feet of a great teacher. An apostle is sent to tell the story.

We can stay in school only so long. Many can look back to those happy days of school life. We might want to stay in school forever—Sooner or later, though, we have to graduate.

Many would be content to spend our lives as disciples, but never apostles. Yet it is clear from Jesus' first Easter sermon that He intends for us to go tell the story. Listen to the other part of His message: "As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you."

Christ's plan for peace of the world is centered in His people. That's us. If the world is to have peace, then we must be peacemakers.

Corrie Ten Boom puts it in a beautiful way. She writes: "An astronaut was drilling to see if there was something deep in the crust of the moon. The drilling was hard work, and he asked the leader on earth if he might stop. His leader said 'no.' The astronaut did not argue, but worked on until he found what he was seeking."

Isn't that a good example of what we must do? We ask, "Lord, may I stop?" the Lord says, "No, go on." We must trust that, in obedience. We will reach the goal.

When General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, went blind, his son Bramwell broke the news to him. "You mean that I am blind?" said the general. "I fear we must contemplate that," his son answered. "I shall never see your face again?" asked the general. "No," said Bramwell, "probably not in this world." The old man's hand moved until it grasped his son's. "Bramwell," he said, "I have done what I could for God, and for the people, with my eyes. Now I shall do what I can for God, and for the people, without my eyes."

General Booth had no time for self-pity. He wasted no energy with inner turmoil. He knew God called him to make a difference in the world. God has called you, and me, to make a difference, as well.

Peace be unto you—peace concerning Christ; peace concerning ourselves. Then—through us—peace for Christ's world.

AMEN.

S.D.G.