

“Peace be with you: The Forgiveness of Sins”

John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, the gospel reading, which begins with this well-known sentence, *On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Sometimes, in the intensity of life’s immediate context, it is tempting to interpret the Scriptures to exactly fit the situation in which we find ourselves. Today’s readings can certainly seem to ‘hit home’ when we hear of disciples sheltering in place out of fear, and – in our first readings – we hear Peter say, “We must obey God rather than men”... and that may kindle a fiery spirit in us that might very well welcome a sermon that stokes thoughts of civil disobedience and first amendment freedom of religion. Be careful, friends, not to apply Scripture in a way that you *want* rather than in the way you *need*.

Indeed, because of our increasing restlessness in this shelter-in-place and, yes, because of some inconsistency in our state mandate over what is and isn’t “essential” for daily life... because of that, it’s certainly understandable that we would want to take these words and say, “Look how perfectly they apply!” But, take care, it’s

not an apples-to-apples comparison. By all means, as we meditate on this text, it *will* apply (we'll get to that here in the sermon)... but *perhaps* not in the way you think.

First, let's be quick to remember that – far more urgent than rescue from our shelter-in-place – is rescue from sin, death and the devil. Far more imperative than our victory over a pestilence is Christ's victory over the grave. Our text is the very night of Jesus' resurrection, and his arrival on the scene is not one that merely brings temporal relief from a temporal discomfort, as if the disciples breathed a sigh of relief, "Oh, thank God, now we can leave this little room we've been stuck in!"

Rather, when Jesus appears on the scene, he immediately declares to them eternal comfort, eternal relief, eternal unity with their risen Lord and the Almighty God: "Peace be with you." Recall, as he said before his death, "It is not the *world's* peace I give you. Do not let your hearts be troubled; neither be afraid." So then, "Peace be with you" is the greeting of heaven, from the throne of God to you, sinner, that you might be certain that there is now unity between God and man, fellowship between the holy and the sin-stained, peace between the Father and those who rejoice in His promised Christ.

"Peace be with you." Three times that refrain echoes in our text. In this case, I don't believe it's numerologically intended to hint at the Trinity, but – even if it's coincidentally "threefold" – it still

reminds us of the peace that is ours with He who created and preserves us, He who justified and redeemed us, He who sanctifies and keeps and will ultimately deliver us into the new creation:

“Peace be with you.”

And, to cement this greeting of peace, Jesus shows his disciples his hands and side, because it’s the marks of the crucifixion that forever remain emblazoned in our risen Lord – not as a matter of the body’s inability to perfectly heal, but as a matter of our Savior’s ability and willingness to perfectly save *and to perfectly remember His willingness to share with us* His victory.

It’s somewhat ironic that so much of Christianity wants to move so quickly past the crucifixion of our Lord, when He himself leaves its marks inscribed in his risen, perfect, holy body. He knows we need those marks... proof sufficient of His true and faithful Word, proof sufficient that the same Christ crucified that St Paul desires to know forever is the same Christ risen that we all glorify in this Easter season. And, it’s those very marks that elicit the response from doubting Thomas himself, “My Lord and my God.” Friends, let us learn to cherish the marvelous truth that Christ himself, even as he has overcome the cross and grave, does not forget that it’s that very cross of his that defines our life and hope. But it’s not the marks *by themselves*, but the marks forever inscribed in our *risen Lord!* – what good would those marks be if Thomas beheld them engraved in the lifeless body of his Lord still entombed? The cross without the empty

grave is just as useless as an empty grave without the cross. Jesus is Lord over both life and death, and He is such because He is both the one who absorbed upon himself the sinner's *death* and the one who in his victory over death brought to the sinner *life*.

And he brings that victory over death to the sinner in *the forgiveness of sins*. There's no greater gift, no more immediate needed benefit, no richer treasure and comfort for us sinners than the forgiveness of sins... for where we have the forgiveness of sins, we are beneficiaries of the divine greeting – “Peace be with you” – and, thus, have life and salvation.

Apart from the forgiveness of sins, no divine greeting, no “Peace be with you” is headed our way. Apart from the forgiveness of sins, we have far more reason than fear of authorities or fear of disease to attempt to shelter-in-place. For, apart from the forgiveness of sins, we sinners are at odds with the Father, enemy of God, opponent of the Almighty... and that's not a status of self-reliance to hope in, it's a status of condemnation to fear and despair and repent of. Do we forget?: it's not merely Thomas' doubt that put Jesus on the cross. It's not just Judas' betrayal or Peter's denial that put Jesus on the cross. He went to the cross for your sins and my sins. And he endured that cross that he might share with you the spoils of his war, having proven himself to be the victorious Lamb with authority to open the Book of Life, saying: “I, as the one with authority over sin and death, I forgive you your sins.”

Now, if that is our greatest need, then we begin to see clearly and properly how this morning's readings actually apply to us in our immediate situation:

When Peter was arrested (the context of our first reading), his preaching was silenced because he proclaimed Jesus to be the Christ. Notice, the authorities were not engaged in a wholesale shelter-in-place of society which also happened to affect religious practice; and, today's authorities are not engaged in an effort to just silence the preaching of Christ, but are engaged in an effort to minimize all gatherings of size. So the Church ought not – at this point – shout at our authorities, “We must obey God rather than men” as a means of supposedly freeing ourselves from unjust chains. However, we *should* be confessing “we must obey God rather than men” when looking in the mirror and reflecting on our own hearts and minds and our fear and our timidity. Peter was told he could not preach that Jesus was the Christ. But, the question for us is not whether *the authorities* are telling us not to trust Jesus as God's Christ, but whether *our own hearts and minds and rationalism* are telling us not to trust Jesus as God's Christ.

When public gatherings are allowed for all society again, will we still worry about the supposed dangers of coming to church? Will we say with Thomas, “Unless I can prove it to myself... my safety, my security, my health... unless I can have a guarantee that satisfies the fears of my reasoning, I will not believe it... I will not come”? You see,

to return, even amidst the ongoing reality of a virus – deadly or otherwise – is to believe in the resurrection. It's to believe that Jesus is the Christ and Lord over life *and death*. It's to believe that, when God calls sinners to gather together, He knows how He will either overcome or allow disease and other effects of sin within the context of his people gathered together at his altar to have remedied their far greater need: the forgiveness of sins.

Indeed, “we must obey God rather than men” is a confession not always about governing authorities, but also about our own desire to govern and safeguard ourselves. Thomas would not believe the central event of all of human history – he rejected the reality of it outright, despite thousands of years of divine promise and hundreds of years of prophecy – because he couldn't rationalize it and comfort himself.

So what about us today? Do we agree in theory, but not in life, that the forgiveness of sins is our great need, the one thing needful that comforts us for life and death that we have the divine greeting, “Peace be with you”? When the Sacrament is again offered in the public assembly (and has it not been continually offered to households?), will our human reason tell us that the forgiveness of sins is not more necessary than is physical health or (back to our reasoning *before* the pandemic) holding down a job or engaging in weekend sports or family get-togethers?

It's a weighty matter to point out, that we often hold on to faith – “Yes, I believe in Jesus” – while rationalizing away faith's dependency upon and joy in the here-and-now forgiveness of sins. The Church-at-large will have to ask itself when this is all said and done, “When society told us that public gatherings were too dangerous, why did we immediately apply that to the communion of saints and the gathering together for the forgiveness of sins? Why did we so willingly lay aside the Supper and say, ‘Oh well, we have Baptism and the Word, let's depend on them for a while’”? It's not that we shouldn't *always* rejoice in Baptism and the Word... but that's not the point; the point is that we must ask whether the Church-at-large allowed herself to rationalize away the usefulness of Jesus' very body and blood – the very body and blood that still bears the marks of the cross, the very body and blood that once earned on the cross and now bestows freely to you – the very forgiveness of sins that Jesus promised in the very context of the “peace be with you” divine greetings that first Easter night.

And, by the way, it's not only the Supper the Church-at-large has foregone, but also the declaration of Absolution! Most immediately, our text for this morning is the institution of Absolution and the Office of the Keys. Yes, forgiveness is worked on earth not just through the Supper, but through the Absolution. But where has that declaration been in our rationalizing ourselves into the ‘safety’ of shelter-in-place? Where has that declaration been in the Church-

at-large's rationalizing itself into virtual worship? A pastor cannot declare forgiveness over one whose confession he has not heard; so how can forgiveness be declared online or in a recording? – must it not, too, fall silent for a time and season of shelter-in-place?

And so, whether Absolution or the Sacrament of the Altar, having left both by the wayside for a time, have we not rationalized ourselves into believing that faith exists apart from and above the forgiveness of sins? ... that 'I can believe in the benefit and thereby have no need to actually receive it!'

But, can you imagine the doctor prescribing to the COVID-19 patient a therapeutic drug like the much-hyped hydroxocloroquine and the patient saying, "Well, as long as I believe in its benefit, I don't need to take it?" Or, if there was a shortage of life-saving medication, could the doctor tell the patient, "Just *think about* the drug, and you will be healed"? How much moreso ought the promised benefit of the forgiveness of sins drive us to the freely offered Absolution and the Supper!

We need the forgiveness of sins... and, thus, we must obey God – the only one who can forgive sins – even where we obey man, who can seek to safeguard and shelter the body. Obey, not in the sense that we earn forgiveness; but obey in the sense of trust in and depend upon and cherish the invitation He gives to receive His freely forgiveness for the sake of His dear Son whose hands and side still bear the marks of the cross.

Doesn't the epistle reading tell us that God refines our faith through these trials – and how is our faith being refined right now, but by being disciplined and trained up to not take for granted “the communion of saints” ...and what flows from that communion when the saints gather at the altar of God, but (as the Creed says), “the forgiveness of sins”! How graciously and gently and patiently is our Lord testing faith that is refined by fiery trials!... to teach us to rely upon and thirst for Jesus' forgiveness, his divine greeting when he gathers us – “Peace be with you” – and *therefore* the fellowship faith rightly has with the Father.

Friends, I do not want you to “turn off” this sermon, to shut off your laptop or put down your cell phone, with a great weight of guilt if you have not yet come to receive the gifts of God during this shelter-in-place (or, for that matter, with a great air of pharisaical pride if you have!). This situation has been unlike any other, and we each have handled it to the best of our sinful abilities. But, we ought acknowledge that we have handled it to the best of *our abilities*, and not always according to *God's* ability. In joy, you may “turn off” this sermon, shut off your laptop, or put down your phone with the comfort and promise that – even to his doubting and fearful disciples – Jesus willingly came ...and willingly comes, as He has promised.

The gifts of forgiveness continue to be readily available to you – even during this shelter-in-place, even where only two or three are gathered together. Come, receive his absolution; receive his

Sacrament. Do not be lulled into thinking that governing authorities and doctors know better as to how urgently we need forgiveness; but hunger and thirst for righteousness, with the result that we will move mountains – even wear masks or social distance into small services of 20 or 10 or even a single household with the pastor, if we must – so long as we may benefit from the forgiveness of sins. For this is the gift that Christ wanted to announce and distribute more immediately than any other; this is the gift that still today affords us the divine greeting, “Peace be with you.”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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April 19, 2020