

Sermon Draft

Text: John 20:19–31

Sermon: “Believe”

One of the challenges of preaching on the Second Sunday of Easter is that the Gospel is the same in all three years of the common lectionary and indeed also in the one-year historic lectionary. There is no getting around John 20:19–31. However, the Holy Spirit in his wisdom inspired John to record three separate focal points in these twelve verses. In 20:19–23 focuses upon the Easter evening appearance of Jesus to ten of his disciples in the Upper Room. Verses 24–29 focus on events a week later when Jesus appears to the disciples a second time, this time with Thomas in attendance. The final two verses provide a commentary by the evangelist as to the reason Scripture is recorded namely, that we may believe and by believing have life.

“Okay, Google, what’s the weather forecast this weekend?”

“Hey, Siri, call Mom.”

“Alexa, set my alarm for 7:00 a.m.”

The human voice has new power! Now we don't have to type with our thumbs anymore. We can talk to our devices and they will do what we ask. Or at least that's how it is supposed to work. It's the sort of thing that was science fiction just a few years ago. At a time when most of the information that went into a computer was on punch cards, Captain Kirk and others on the USS Enterprise talked to a computer. And now we all can talk to the computer. We can dictate to our word-processing programs, we can surf the internet without touching the keyboard, and we can call up a recipe in the kitchen without dirtying the tablet screen.

God created the voice to have power. During this time of COVID-19 our voices are even more important. Especially to the person who is in home quarantine and alone. A friendly phone call can make all the difference in their day.

When sea lions gather in large colonies to raise their young, hundreds of pups will swim out into the water together and come back together. Once on the shore, they find their mothers by listening for the distinct sound of the mother's voice.

In time, all the young find their way back to their own mothers.

Easter is, among other things, about the power of the voice. On this Second Sunday of Easter, the Risen Lord Jesus comes to you and to me to speak His peace into our hearts so that we may speak that peace to the world.

This is what we read in this morning's Gospel. After Mary and the other women told Jesus' disciples, they had seen the Lord, the disciples did not really believe. By the evening of the day, the disciples are behind locked doors, like a little hutch of rabbits afraid of the wolf that might be looking for them. This is the Church at its absolute worst. Hunkered down, huddled together, letting fear rather than faith control their every thought and action.

Then suddenly, Jesus comes and stands among them. John says the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. But in their joy not one of them apologizes for his behavior over the last few days. No one says he's sorry or that they should have done better. Perhaps part of the reason is they don't get a chance to say anything.

Instead, it's Jesus who speaks the first word. And just as was the case at the sound of God's voice in creation, the sound of Jesus' voice creates something wonderful and new: "*Peace be with you,*" he says (v 19).

This is not a wish or a hope. It is his gift to them. "Peace be with you," he says, and there is peace and joy.

This, the disciples could only begin to realize, was the whole point of what Jesus had just been through. Jesus' death on the cross was to reestablish the peace between God and man that had been shattered when we first sinned. Sin will always stand as separation, conflict, between two parties. In sin, we live for ourselves, not for the other. In sin, we cannot be in harmony, our will gladly yielded to the other. In sin, we could never be with God, because his holiness cannot be in relationship with unholiness. But by taking our sin to the cross, Christ removed the separation and reconciled us to God, bringing us back into peace with him.

The whole scene repeats a week later when Thomas, at last, is with the disciples. The doors are still locked, but Jesus comes again. He speaks the same word. “Peace be with you.” Rather than scolding, Jesus encourages Thomas to touch and see the wounds. ***“Do not disbelieve, but believe”*** (v 27).

Even though two thousand years have passed since that first Easter evening, the church still struggles to get out from behind locked doors and into the world. While we might not fear suffering the same cruelty as Jesus suffered on the cross the fear that kept the first apostles locked up there is as much to be wary of in the twenty-first century as there was in the first century. Like the pandemic we are facing, we’re even told to lock ourselves away in our homes. We worship online and don’t even get to come together physically.

The temptation is to focus all our attention on our fear and let that fear paralyze us. This text from John 20 is not about how the world locks its doors to the Gospel, but how the Church locks itself away from the world.

The irony of the disciples' locked doors is that they weren't really keeping out soldiers looking to crucify them and they weren't keeping out friends and relatives who may have wanted to ridicule them for following Jesus; there is no record of either of those things happening. The One they were locking out was Jesus. They locked out the word he had so clearly spoken to them about dying and rising again, and in locking out that word, they locked out Jesus. When fear becomes our focus, we fall into the same trap; we lock out the Lord, who time and again tells his Church, ***“Do not be afraid!”***

Jesus will have none of it! The securely locked doors are no problem for him. If the grave could not keep him in the ground, their padlocks would not keep him outside the room where they were gathered. And so, he comes and stands among them and among us and speaks his word, a word that brings the very thing it says: Peace be with you!

This is Jesus' word to us all this Second Sunday of Easter. ***“Peace be with you.” “Peace, your sin is forgiven!” “Do not fear the world. I have overcome the world. Peace be with you.”***

That word comes to you and me today, with exactly the same power as it came to those first disciples on the first Easter and to Thomas a week later. *“These [words] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”* (v 31). In his word, Jesus comes among us today, and we experience the power of his voice. He doesn’t just tell us about peace, but he actually speaks peace to you and me. As Luther puts it, “As soon as He said it, it was done” (AE 12:32).

Jesus spoke his peace to us in the water of our Baptism, where we were joined to his death and resurrection and we died to sin and rose to new life. That peace is spoken to us every time we return in repentance to our Baptism, and he says to you through your pastor, “I forgive you all your sins.” That peace is spoken to you at his table, where in, with, and under bread and wine, he comes through space and time to feed you his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins and to lift from you your fears. There his voice speaks peace. “This is for you,” he says, “for the forgiveness of sin.”

And we rise from the table at peace, ready to go into the world.

“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (v 21). The Lord cannot be bound; his word will not be bound; and his followers do not live behind locked doors. He sends us out into the world, but we do not go empty-handed.

He breathes his Holy Spirit upon his disciples, and to his Church, he hands the keys to the kingdom of heaven. *“If you forgive the sins of anyone they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld”* (v 23). And with that, we, like those first disciples, are sent to the world to be the voice of peace. Our voices, our human voices, become voices of power, not because they are louder, wiser, or more entertaining than other voices, but because through our voice, he himself speaks.

Long before there was a Siri, Alexa, or Google, there was the risen Lord Jesus, speaking to and through people like you and me, so that all who are locked behind doors of fear, sin, sickness, and even death itself might hear his word: *“Peace be with you.”* Amen