

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday after Easter, April 15, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 192, 187, 188, 190, 50.

Lessons: Acts 2:22-32, 1 Peter 1:3-9, Luke 24:33-49

Sermon Text: John 20:19-23.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The followers of Jesus were behind locked doors because of fear of the Jewish authorities, who had crucified Jesus. They had been afraid that his disciples would steal his body and claim he had risen from the dead. Now his body was missing and his disciples would be prime suspects. They were afraid that the Jewish authorities, having arrested and killed Jesus, might also arrest them. This was that very same day, in the evening, after He had appeared alive to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, to the women on the way back from the tomb, to Peter, and to the two followers of Jesus on their way to Emmaus. And now he shows Himself alive to ten of the apostles. They were together in a house in Jerusalem and had carefully locked the doors.

After all, they had seen what the Jewish leaders had done to Jesus, and with Jesus' body missing, they worried that those same Jews would turn against them. They just didn't feel safe.

But Jesus appears to them! What did he say to them to comfort and assure them? ***"Peace be with you."*** Listen carefully today as

JESUS APPEARS AND GIVES HIS DISCIPLES A MESSAGE OF PEACE

- 1. They were in need of peace – peace with God and peace away from the world.**
- 2. Jesus brings a message of peace with his words: Sins are forgiven!**
- 3. Jesus' words are not empty words. There is nothing to fear!**

Locked doors could not keep Jesus out. We don't know much about Jesus' resurrected body – except that it was a glorified body, but we know he left a sealed tomb with even the grave cloths still in place and at least one was neatly folded – in the tomb – and that he now appeared inside a locked room.

He gives them the greeting ***"peace be with you."*** Peace is a word they all need to hear. Luke tells us: ***"They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet."*** (Luke 24:37-40)

Jesus first wants to convince his disciples they are not seeing some kind of a ghost or a spirit being but a real, live person. His resurrected body still had the marks of the nails and the spear from the crucifixion. He invites them to touch him to demonstrate that he has flesh and blood and is no ghost. Finally he asks for food and eats a piece of broiled fish before their doubting eyes.

The disciples had heard that Jesus had risen from the dead. Yet they were afraid and trembled when Jesus appeared to them so suddenly. Jesus removed their fears by saying: ***"Peace be with you."*** But these words were spoken by Jesus not only to quiet the disciples' fears. They have a far deeper meaning. Jesus was presenting the disciples with his great Easter gift, peace with God.

This peace is the condition of peace between man and God. He who has this peace has the comfort and enjoyment of true peace of heart. He who has this peace is no longer an enemy of God because of sin, but is fully reconciled with the heavenly Father. This peace is the divine comfort and assurance that all sins have been taken away.

How was this peace established between God and man? Scripture answers: ***"After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."*** Jesus showed the disciples his wounds received on the cross, the nail prints in his hands and feet, and his pierced side. These wounds were identifying marks. They showed the disciples that this was indeed the crucified Lord Jesus who was now alive, and had risen from the dead. But the wounds on Jesus' body also have a deeper meaning. They offer conclusive evidence that Jesus ***"was pierced for our transgressions."*** (Isaiah 53:5) They show what a great price was paid by Jesus to atone for our sins. They show that the great Lamb of God was sacrificed on the cross for the guilt of all mankind.

But these wounds are not in a dead body in the grave. The risen, living Savior displays them. The wounds on the risen Savior's body show that our Savior's sacrifice on the cross was sufficient to atone for all our sins. The fact that God the Father raised Christ from the grave proves that Jesus' sacrifice for all sin was accepted by the Father. In this way our peace with God has been established and confirmed. Because of Jesus' resurrection all is well between God the Father and us. Let us never forget that we have peace with God and are God's dear children only through faith in Jesus Christ, who was crucified for our sins, and raised again for our justification.

Three days ago, on Thursday night, they had been celebrating the Jewish festival of Passover with Jesus, their leader. This morning they thought he was dead – captured at night by the leaders of the Jews, dragged through several trials at night, and executed on Friday.

Today was the third day since he was crucified. They had seen what the Jews did to their leader. And then Jesus appears! Today the grave was empty. The Jesus whom they knew had been dead and placed in a grave! But now he is alive again!

Jesus greeted the disciples with the typical Hebrew greeting: ***"Peace be with you!"*** But on the lips of the risen Savior, it was much more than a casual wish. He brought them the peace that would sustain them through all earthly troubles.

Every disciple, even today, can still read and hear and apply this greeting to himself or herself personally. Jesus also says to us ***"Peace be with you!"***

He is the same person, and his message is the same, but he has a glorified body, risen from the dead and come back to life. Luke, in our Gospel lesson, tells us that Jesus reminds them of how his entire ministry is a fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. One writer observed that "The first public sermon preached by Jesus as recorded in Luke began with this statement: ***'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'***". (Luke 4:21) The Old Testament is promise, and the New Testament is fulfillment. The message is the same: repentance and the forgiveness of sins."

This is the resurrected Son of God telling them that they have peace! Listen to what Jesus had said previously: ***"All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*** (John 14:25-27) This is a peace that would sustain them through all earthly troubles. And again: ***"But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. 'I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'" (John 16:32-33)***

The enmity between God and man had been removed. God was reconciled to His wayward and sinful, erring children. The peace of the risen Lord is the comfort and joy of all believers.

This is the peace we have because we know that God is no longer angry with us because of our sins. Why? Because our sins are forgiven! God forgives them. He forgives them and announces in and through the Word of God and especially in the words of our sermon text: ***"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."***

"Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.'" Once more Jesus repeated the words: "Peace be with you!" He did this because the disciples were not only to have this peace with God for themselves, but they were to be the messengers of the Gospel of peace for other people. As

God the Father sent Jesus into the world to establish peace, so also Jesus commissioned the disciples to preach the Gospel of peace to all men. We – including all you who are listening – are also to reach out and give this message to anyone who will listen.

This work continues also today, in fact, even at this very moment, and unto the end of time, for Jesus has commanded his believing followers: ***“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”*** (Matthew 28:19-20) Just what this work consists of, our text also tells us. ***“And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’”*** Let us keep in mind how peace with God has been established, namely, by the work of redemption which Christ finished on the cross. Let us also keep in mind that we have this peace with God because all our sins have been taken away. This message has been recorded in the Holy Gospel. In order that all men may have this knowledge of the forgiveness of sins, the Gospel is to be proclaimed. It is the very heart of the Gospel of Christ that all our sins have been forgiven for Jesus’ sake and that God has declared all sinners righteous in his sight for Jesus’ sake.

Now it is true that God alone can forgive and retain sins. But he has given his Church on earth, the believers in Christ, the power to pronounce forgiveness in Jesus’ name and to withhold forgiveness when sinners refuse to repent. Jesus has made his Church on earth his authorized agent of this power. We call this power to forgive and to retain sins the Ministry of the Keys, or the Use of the Keys. These keys unlock heaven to penitent sinners and lock heaven for unrepentant sinners. This is what was established when Jesus gave his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit by breathing on them and authorizing them to forgive and retain sins. When this is done, we believe as Luther says in the Catechism: “This is as valid and certain in heaven also as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.”

On this day in Jerusalem, Jesus again spoke peace to them and he also commissioned them – and all believers – to carry on his work. In the 40 days leading up to and including his ascension, Jesus continued to prepare his followers to preach the Gospel so that his church on earth might grow and that many might come to faith in Jesus and in the forgiveness of sins through his blood. Although he reserved a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit for Pentecost, he gave them the Holy Spirit here, too, to sustain them in their mission.

Jesus sends his followers out into the world just as the Father had sent him, to bring his salvation. ***“As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”*** (John 17:18) Jesus earned salvation, and in his resurrection, assured it. We report it, we tell about it, and spread his message of peace and the forgiveness of sins.

The key to the disciples’ mission was the forgiveness of sins, and with the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave them the authority and power to forgive sins. The forgiveness of sins remains at the center of Christianity. Jesus won forgiveness for everyone through his death. Still, many will refuse to repent of their sins and will shun his forgiveness. Others will repent and look for the assurance that they are indeed forgiven. In the Gospel of Jesus Christ they will find that assurance. So Jesus extended his authority to the church to forgive the penitent sinners but to hold the impenitent to their sins.

That message of the forgiveness of sins is my mission today, and it is your mission today and tomorrow and all your life. As redeemed, believing children of God, you are called upon to witness to Christ, both in your words and in your lives, bringing forth fruits of repentance to serve our God.

Let us encourage, strengthen, and pray for one another as we go about our mission as God’s children. May our fruits of faith bring many to faith in our Savior Jesus Christ. May the forgiveness of sins we enjoy be shared with many! God grant it. Amen.