

“WHAT DO WE DO NOW?”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: John 20:19-31

So what? What do we do now? After his resurrection, Christ repeatedly offers peace to his disciples. Christ understands our need for true peace. So I want to start by taking a quick poll. I'm just curious...anybody feel like you've now achieved the greatest possible peace in your life? What about the disciples?

Our Scripture reading from John this morning tells the story of the first Easter evening. Now, in our minds, this is a joyous time. Just think about the wonderful celebration of Christ's resurrection that we had here in this place last week! Easter is always such a happy time—and certainly, we would think, it would have been so from the very beginning. The disciples mourned Christ's crucifixion, but now they have seen the empty tomb! Praise God, Christ is victorious!

Except, that's not their demeanor, is it? John's gospel tells us that on the evening of that first Easter, the disciples were locked away in a room. They were scared. They were afraid of the Jewish authorities. They were experiencing anything but joy and peace. And that's why I want to talk about peace this morning.

The simple fact of the matter is, we can talk about peace until we're "blue in the face"; we can seek peace in our lives in every way possible; but ultimately, there are still going to be times in our lives when we are anxious or fearful, just like the disciples on this first Easter evening.

Maybe, despite our best efforts, we are feeling anxious or fearful right now. This is why we need to hear this story of the disciples' second encounter with Christ on the day he was resurrected. Listen again to John's words, *"That evening...the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders."*

Here was a timid, frightened group of followers. And really, it's no wonder. Not too long ago, throngs of people were welcoming Jesus, waving palm branches and singing praises to him. Then, just a few days later, he is arrested, put on trial, and crucified on a cross. The crucifixion of Jesus had devastated the disciples, and no matter what anyone said to them (not even the women's testimony of an empty tomb), they could not be shaken of their grief and sorrow.

The picture John gives us is of a shell-shocked bunch of disciples who gather in hiding to mourn the death of their leader. But they also gather in a common fear, afraid of that knock on the door that will signal they are next. Fear shut them out and anxiety locked them up. Even though the light of life had dawned that very day with Christ's resurrection, the disciples still were not experiencing Christ's peace. But look what happens next.

At the pinnacle of their anxiety, Christ appears. And listen to the very first thing that Jesus says to his disciples, ***"Peace be with you."*** And listen to the second thing Christ says, ***"Peace be with you."*** And hear the words that Christ said a week later when he appeared again for Thomas' benefit, ***"Peace be with you."*** Three times Jesus says to his disciples, ***"Peace be with you."***

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that for Jesus to say this three times, the disciples must've really needed to hear it. They needed to be set free from the fear that locked them in. They needed what only Christ could give them; peace, forgiveness, new hope, and a reason for living. And that's exactly what Christ did for them.

It's what Christ does for us. He sets us free and makes us whole again. That's what the peace of Christ is all about! Being restored to the goodness that God created in us, being made whole, being restored to live and love again without all the fear and anxiety. Christ gave the disciples peace because that's what they needed the most. And Christ offers us that same peace as well.

It's easy when troubles surround us and difficulties come our way to forget God's promises and act as if Christ never existed. But we also need to understand that the promise of God in Christ Jesus is not that our lives will be worry and trouble free. There are going to be times when we are huddled in a tiny closet with storms whirling all around us, when we are lying in a hospital bed crippled by illness and disease, when grief or depression saps all our energy and our hope.

Yet in those moments, Christ's words remain, "***Peace be with you.***" No matter how we may try to barricade ourselves, the living Christ comes to us, unhindered by our fears, unblocked by our defenses. Christ does not rebuke our anxiety, but says simply, "***Peace,***" offering anxiety's antidote.

You see, the peace that Christ brings is different, and I think that's sometimes why we feel that peace is so elusive. The peace Jesus offers has nothing to do with tranquility and harmony—this peace is about living into Christ's own mission, and sometimes that will be a trying, difficult, scary way, which is why our journey for peace may never end. Jesus' peace is the sort that brings back into the fold the outcast and the marginalized. This is a peace that turns upside down the societal conventions of first and last, blessed and cursed, rich and poor. Jesus' peace invites the lion to see the lamb as neighbor and friend, the Jew to speak with the Samaritan, and the prostitute to dine with the Pharisee.

Peace, you see, is more than just a freedom from fear; it is actually a new way of living and being in the world. True peace is something we all want, and it's something we all need; not only for ourselves, but for our communities and our world.

What do we do now? Here are some suggestions of certain things that we can and should do in our lives in an effort to overcome some of the sources of anxiety and experience more peace—we need to celebrate all the good in our lives and in the world, and not be overwhelmed by the negative. We need to stay connected with God's Spirit in our lives and remember our identity as God's beloved. We need to pray regularly. We need to take time to build and foster real relationships with one another and especially with God. We need to live as best we can in the light of Christ's light.

But, even as we seek to do those things, we have to realize that despite all our best efforts, there will be times when "things go south," and peace will seem like nothing but a pipe dream. It happened to Christ's disciples and it will happen to us. But if we can follow Christ in his way, then God's promise of peace never changes and it never goes away. We will go through some tough spots, we will walk through some dark valleys, and we may even stand at the foot of the cross. Still, no matter how we might be barricaded behind fear and anxiety, Christ will come among us and he will say as many times as we need to hear it:

Peace be with you...

Peace be with you...

Peace be with you...