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Easter 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Peace be with you”

Text: John 20:19-31 (Acts 5:12, 17-32; Revelation 1:4-18)

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

That first Easter night, the disciples were in turmoil. They were confused. They were scared. They didn't know what to do. They didn't know what to think. The women had seen the empty tomb. So had Peter and John. *Perhaps* it was true. Perhaps Jesus had risen from the dead. . . . But if He had, where was He? The Jews – *they* were still out there! And confident and energized by their victory over Jesus, once the Passover Festival was over, surely they would be coming after the followers of Jesus next! . . . And so the disciples had no peace. Even behind locked doors, they had no peace. Every time they heard a voice, or some strange sound, or the march of feet or horses' hoofs – they thought the worst. And fear fed upon fear, and the longer it went, the worse it got.

But it was not only from things *outside themselves* that the disciples had no peace; it was not only from things outside themselves that the disciples were hiding – they were, I think, also trying to hide *from themselves*. They had let their Lord down. They had abandoned Him right when He needed them. They had pledged themselves to Him and were not able to follow through. They thought they could, but they could not. And so there were voices from within would also give them no rest, no peace. Their sin, their conscience, their weakness, weighing heavy on them; condemning them.

And we know how they felt. For who among us has not felt them same? There is so much in this world, outside of us, that robs us of peace, and that causes us fear. Criminals that we can see; diseases that we cannot see. Terrorism that comes upon us so swiftly and unexpectedly; accidents than seem so random. Gone are the days when we could leave our doors unlocked at night. But even locking our doors does not help. That does not give us the peace that we are seeking. For also, like the disciples, there is the battle for peace that we fight within ourselves. For we too have let our Lord down. We too are sometimes too ashamed or too afraid to speak. We too have pledged ourselves to Him and are not able to follow through. We sin, and continue in sin, and even *like* some of our sins. But our sin, our conscience, our weakness, also weighs heavy on us; *and robs us of our peace.*

If only we could get away from it all! And hide from it all. Then we would have peace, right?

Well actually, no. Because despite what we may think, it is not anything outside of us or inside of us that has robbed us of our peace. For I have seen people at peace who are dying with cancer in its final stages. I have seen people at peace even after horrible accidents. I have seen people at peace even in the midst of disappointment and turmoil. No, peace is not taken from us by troubles, nor is it given to us by a lack of troubles. What robs us of our peace is, in fact, **unbelief**. It is a lack of faith. It is the thought that these things that are happening around us and in us *are more powerful than God*. That God cannot or will not protect us from them, or deliver us from them, or *use* them for His good. It is the thought that it is just me against them . . . and I am so little and weak, and they are so big and strong. . . . And therefore, without faith and trust, we are just like the disciples: we worry, we have anxiety, we fear. Fear that cripples us, and threatens to consume us.

But then, Jesus comes. Jesus comes to His frightened, cowering disciples. He comes, not as a spirit, but in His body. His resurrected body. And He gives to them what they so desperately need: ***“Peace be with you”*** He says. And His Word does what it says. The disciples are at peace, because with His Word and His presence, *their faith was restored*. Did they fear the Jews? Did they fear death? These need not be feared – see, Jesus has conquered them! And did they fear their sins? Did they fear what Jesus would think of them? These need not be feared either – see, Jesus does not hold these things against them. They are forgiven. He makes no mention their sins, or doubts, or shortcomings, or fear. He brings only peace. And they have peace, for they now know that there is nothing to fear. They are not alone. They are not on their own. **They believe.**

But there is one who is still in turmoil. Still confused. Still scared. Thomas. And so his brothers, now filled with faith, go searching for him. And when they find him, they tell him the good news, but he cannot believe it. His fear, his despair, his doubt, is too much for him. . . . And so they re-create the scene, for Thomas. They are again behind those locked doors – this time not, we are told, in fear of the Jews, *but for Thomas’ sake*. And Jesus comes again. A “second coming,” if you will. In flesh and blood. And again He does not condemn. He gives peace. He offers His body to Thomas. And because of His Word and His presence, *Thomas’ faith is restored*. **He believes.**

And for the same reason, Jesus comes to us today. To you and I, who are afraid, who worry, who wonder, who doubt. He comes with His Word and His presence. His Word, which does what it says, and His presence – His real body and blood – to give us what we so desperately need: peace. For although we do not see and feel the wounds of Christ,

the Lamb of God, as Thomas did, those wounds are here for us. He offers His body to us. And while we may not be able to put our fingers into the holes in Jesus' hands and feet, or our hand into His side – we do have His body put on our tongues, and His blood poured on our lips. The same body and blood that Thomas touched. The same body and blood that hung on the cross and laid in the grave. The same body and blood, here, to give us peace. And so this is what we say in the liturgy. This is what we confess to be true. Right before you come forward to receive this body and blood, you hear of this peace: “*The peace of the Lord be with you always.*” Then you sing, “*Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; grant us peace.*” And then again, right after you receive this body and blood, you hear: “*Depart in peace.*” And then there are the final words of the liturgy, the Benediction: “*The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.*”

And you reply: “*Amen.*” And with that word you are confessing, “*Yes, this is true. Yes, I am forgiven. Yes, I believe. Yes, I have peace. The peace of the Lord. The peace of sins forgiven. Yes, I have nothing to fear. Yes, **my Lord and my God.**” For my Saviour is here for me. Just as He was for the disciples and for Thomas – He is here for me. My Saviour who was described also in the reading from Revelation: “***The one who is and who was and who is to come. . . . The Alpha and the Omega; the beginning and the ending. The Almighty. . . . The one who died, and behold is alive forevermore. And who has the keys of death and hell.***” If this Saviour is here for me, what have I to fear? What can He not give me? What will He not do for me?*

And like the disciples, and like Thomas, our faith is restored. **We believe.** . . . Now that doesn't mean that bad things won't happen – they will. But it does mean that even in the face of these things, you can have peace. For things are not out of control. Your Saviour has conquered all. There is nothing more powerful, on the earth, or under the earth, or above the earth; nothing in all of creation, that can separate you from your Saviour. He is here for you – in His body and blood – to give you peace. To give you faith. To give you hope and confidence.

And this is the change we see in the disciples. The same disciples who once hid from the Jewish authorities behind locked doors, now (we heard in the reading from Acts) boldly stand before them and defy them. “***We must obey God rather than men.***” They have peace. Even under arrest; even faced with persecution; even when they become martyrs. They have peace. For their faith is not in themselves, but in the One who has overcome. And they know that come what may, they already have the victory in Him.

And so to you and I. Faith. Peace. Victory. For Jesus gave not only His peace to His disciples, but also *the means* to give this peace forever. He gives His apostles, His Church, His keys. The keys to His kingdom. The keys of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

To forgive. To continue to forgive. That this peace may not just be for some, but for all! . . . And so this is what the Church now does. The one, holy, Christian, and Apostolic Church. The Church built on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, with Christ as the cornerstone. The Church proclaiming the Word and giving the Sacraments. The Church following in the footsteps of the apostles. . . . *What do we do?* What did the disciples do? After receiving Jesus' peace, they go find Thomas! And so what do we do? Having received the forgiveness and peace of Christ ourselves, we go find Thomas. All the Thomas'. All the ones in turmoil. All those in fear and despair and doubt. For we have good news! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And His Word and presence bring what we so desperately need: faith and peace.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.