

## **“Carriers of peace” John 20:19-31**

“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.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So, the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these 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.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

This is where the same thing happens again and again, every first day of the week. In the midst of congregation, when God’s chosen people are brought together by the gentle and mighty work of God’s own Spirit in us.

This is where our Triune God, whom we know as our Father and as our brother Jesus Christ and as God the Holy Spirit, this is where He Himself gathers us in His presence, where He comes to dwell among us and to bless us.

Just like back then on that day... Today as well Jesus shows up in our midst, even if not exactly the same way as He did on that day, but it is Him who comes and greets you: “Peace be with you! Peace be with you, my dear brothers and sisters!”

This is not only a nice greeting; our Lord Jesus Christ bestows upon us what He says. Remember, as our Dr Martin Luther used to say: “God’s words are God’s works”. What He says, it happens. “Peace be with you!” God’s peace with you... And what He gives us with this divine greeting is so much more than we realize.

We heard about the events of that evening, which John the beloved disciple of Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit, has recorded for your sake – “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” – and those events in a way remind us about the rhythm of our lives.

What do I mean by that? **They give us rather precise picture of how we feel without Jesus, of what Jesus brings us, and what He sends us to do?** Let's reflect on these together. **How we often feel when without Jesus, what He brings us, and with what mission He sends us.**

**How do we often feel without Jesus?** I would say there are a lot similarities between the disciples on that evening, and us, with how we might feel in this world. "The doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews..."

Those were the disciples of Jesus, those hand-picked by Jesus Himself, who had left everything to follow their Master, who just a week before had planned who will hold which portfolio in Jesus' new government.

They, who were overjoyed witnessing how their Master was welcomed into Jerusalem, who were so busy with their own personal hopes and dreams, that they somehow had totally missed or ignored what Jesus repeatedly told them.

That He "will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and He will be raised on the third day." (Matt 20:19-19)

Our brain has this ability to totally block out something that we can't understand, that doesn't fit in with how we want to perceive this world. It seems the disciples had done exactly that, but then... unexpectedly for them, just as Jesus foretold, He is arrested, condemned, mocked, flogged and crucified. Dead...

Dead... not only Jesus is dead, but all their hopes and dreams are dead. Violently destroyed. More, because Jesus was considered so dangerous that He had to be killed, it meant that His disciples should be ready to embrace the same fate.

They were hiding behind the locked doors, out our fear. Makes sense, they had witness hostility, they had been rejected, and much greater powers of that day were against them, plotting who knows what... to eradicate all memories about this Jesus.

Can you notice quite a few similarities with Christian life in general? There certainly are, and always have been plenty reasons for fear, concerns, for isolating ourselves and hiding behind the closed doors. Look, for example, at us, our congregation!

This little flock... and as we are often reminded in tragic tone – not just little, but also shrinking flock. Our dearly held beliefs are less and less popular in the society where we live. At least among those who try to set a tone for what everyone should believe and confess if they want to go with times, so to speak.

There certainly are cultural forces and influences, some quite vicious and aggressive that keep pushing very different agendas to what we as Christians could embrace with a good conscience. There are enough examples where Christians are deliberately targeted and treated badly, even taken to courts.

How does all of that make us feel? I guess it is not that difficult to relate emotionally to how Jesus' disciples felt on that evening. How many times have we remained silent when we needed to speak up? How many times have we been afraid or embarrassed to confess Jesus as our Lord?

We too, just like the Twelve, tend to have this selective hearing, we want to hear and rejoice and hold to the promises of blessings and protection and good life with Jesus, and to ignore what He warned us about, what it means to follow Him.

That "we [too] will be delivered over to courts and flogged in synagogues, that we [too] will be dragged before governors and kings for Jesus' sake... that we [too] will be hated by all for Jesus' name's sake." (Matt 10)

So, yes, this is how we may from time to time feel in this world. As strangers and outsiders, not so popular, often even rejected because of beliefs and convictions that we hold dear, and all of that may make us fearful and anxious and willing to hide from the world outside.

But then Jesus rocks up, **and what does He bring us?** That's our second question. Jesus comes in our midst and He speaks to you: "My dear brother, my sister, peace be with you!" "Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord."

They were glad, they were overjoyed. Everything was turned upside down once again. Jesus, their Lord, their Master, their Teacher, the One who had made them feel so safe and hopeful, whose presence was better than anything, He was alive! Again!

This is what Jesus brings to us as well, this is what we are blessed to experience as He gathers us to be among us. Jesus appeared among His chosen disciples and assured them of His continuous presence with them.

It is impossible to fully relate to how they may have felt, instantly swinging from the fear of persecution and hopelessness to the divine joy of reunion with the Lord Jesus and the hope for bright and glorious future.

The same is true for us. Whatever our week may have been out there, whatever fear and anxieties may oppress us, whichever way we may have denied our Lord or been ashamed or embarrassed to be His disciples – Jesus shows up and brings us His peace, He fill us with the joy of being again in His presence, of being assured that He will never abandon us, that He will always be here for you.

Yes, we don't see the Risen Jesus with our eyes, we can't touch His scars with our hands, but we are not made of eyes and hands only, that's not the only way we perceive this world. How do you know that you are loved? How do you know that you matter? How do you know that your future is safe? Is it all eyes and hands?

We can sense it, we can experience it with our very being, we may be overwhelmed with the sense of being embrace by God's love, we may sense the blessed peace that surpasses all our understanding; and all of that is as real as what we see and touch.

And we do see and touch Jesus amidst us as He feeds us in His Holy Meal, and we do feel His love, as He sends His brothers and sisters, and our brothers and sisters to speak this love to us, to hug us, to embrace and hold us.

And we do experience His presence as He fills our hearts with warmth and excitement and desire to pass on His love and blessings to others, especially those of God's household. That's Him who puts smile on your face. That's Jesus for you, right here!

But then there is something else that we need to be reminded of. **What does Jesus send us to do, what is His mission for us?** "Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." This is it!

This is Jesus: "As the Father has sent me to bring you peace, even so I am sending you. I am not sending you alone, please, don't worry, receive the Holy Spirit, the Divine Helper, and I give you my authority, this incredible authority to forgive sins. Remember, when you forgive someone their sins on behalf of me, they will be forgiven, truly forgiven. They will have peace with me."

What exactly does this mean? First, Biblically the word "peace" has this rich meaning, it refers to what the Old Testament describes with the word "Shalom". It means complete, all-embracing well-being. The Creator's desired state for us.

The state of goodness, the good design of our Creator to which He says with delight: "This is good, this is very good!" And now Jesus brings this peace to us and He sends us to bring this peace to everyone whom He has placed in our lives.

And how are we to bring this peace? Jesus says – by means of forgiveness. That's it? Yes, that's it! But what a big deal? Forgiveness... Ha! Now, but wait, there is more than meets the eye, or should we say, more than meets the ear.

Forgiveness deals with our sin. Forgiveness launches God's work of restoration of His fallen creatures. We could say that God's forgiveness counters and reverses the effects of our sinfulness. And they are many. Many indeed.

Sin has broken our relationships with the true God. We don't trust Him, we don't know Him, we don't want to know Him. Sin has tainted our self-understanding, we don't know who we are; how precious, how unique, how loved, how longed for and cared for we are.

Sin has filled our hearts with evil passions and uncontrollable desires and emotions. We don't desire what is good and beautiful, but often the very opposite. Sin has tricked us to rely on created things to satisfy the deep longing of our hearts which only true God, your Creator and Redeemer can satisfy.

Sin has made us fools, as we don't know God's wisdom for our lives anymore and we boast in our foolishness. Sin has made us its slaves, and we can't free ourselves. Left on our own we are doomed. And that's where God's forgiveness come it!

The authority to forgive sins on behalf of God the Father is not a small thing. It is God's creative power to redeem and restore His creation. When you speak this message of forgiveness – "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit!" – the Holy Spirit begins to restore what is broken.

This message of peace, it restores our relationships with our God, we begin to trust Him, and we are able to rejoice and respond to His love. This forgiveness tells us truth of who we are.

God's beloved and dear children, chosen from before the foundation of the world, destined for eternal glory. This forgiveness changes our hearts, it places us into the loving hands of our Father, it makes us wise, it grants us freedom from all the dark forces that prey on us and so on...

See what a great thing it is! See, what a great mission you are sent with! We are not here to argue with the world, who is right, even as we bring the truth, we are not to police society, even as we bring the knowledge of what is good and evil – we are to bring the world peace, God's Shalom, the fulness and abundance of His blessings.

This is why you are here. To receive all of this from Jesus until your fill, and to pass it on to those you meet on your way. You are carriers of God's peace, of His Shalom, you are the agents of God's New Creation, sent to begin the restoration of this fallen world, to bring forth the Kingdom of God.

It's scary to think – who are we to be able to do this, it's too much for us?! Of course, but we are not sent to do this on our own. The Triune God is doing a new thing, His thing, He is doing it in His power, that is His Spirit that bring forth all these changes.

However, He has chosen to do this through us. He has chosen you, to be part of His new venture, to bring His peace to the world by proclaiming His forgiveness. These are incredibly great and glorious divine realities that we participate in.

What a privilege! To be carriers of God's peace! Agents of His New Creation! May the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus has given you, may He help you to embrace the truth of who you are and what amazing responsibilities our Father has entrusted to you!

"Peace be with you, my dear brothers and sisters!" As the Father send Jesus, so now Jesus is sending you!

Amen.