

Peace Be with You!

A promise and a gift



Of all the ways Jesus could have greeted the apostles on Easter Sunday, he chose four simple words: “Peace be with you” (John 20:19). It can be very easy to glide over this greeting, but opening messages like this can tell us a lot. Remember,

Jesus had just risen from the dead. He had just fulfilled God's centuries-long plan of salvation.

He had just overthrown the devil and opened heaven for all who believe. Now the time had come to reveal himself to his closest friends. It was time to reveal their salvation and the miracle of the resurrection. So wouldn't you think he would say something far more important to mark this crucial moment? But he didn't. He chose instead to offer an everyday greeting.

Yet for all its informality, this greeting captures the heart of the Easter message. So let's take a look at the gift of peace that Jesus offered his apostles to see how we can know the same peace in our hearts.

Peace with God. The apostles were not in the most peaceful state when Easter Sunday dawned. Not only had they seen Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, but they also experienced their own weakness and lack of faith. Rather than hold on to his promise that he would rise again, they gave in to fear and doubt. Scattering at Jesus' arrest, they hung back during his trial and crucifixion. Then they went into hiding, worried that the authorities would come after them. By all accounts, they had failed Jesus.

But when Jesus appeared, he didn't bring up the painful, embarrassing events of the past few days. He didn't even mention them! Instead, he just wished them peace.

Peace be with you. These words remind us of the words Jesus spoke to the woman caught in adultery. When all her accusers had walked away, Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more" (John 8:11). They also remind us of how Jesus responded when Peter said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). He didn't join Peter in his negative self-appraisal. He didn't recite a list of his sins and failings. All he said was, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (5:10).

In both these stories, and so many more, Jesus' main goal was to show that he did not come into the world to condemn us but to save us (John 3:17). He didn't want a relationship marked by vengeance, retribution, or anger. All he wanted was for us to be at peace with him.

Two Kinds of Peace. What do the words "Peace be with you" say to us? They say that no matter how many times we sin, no matter how grievous our offenses are, God stands ready to forgive us and release us from guilt. He does this so that we can experience the peace that comes from being reconciled with him. As long as we stay with him, his peace will stay with us.

Now, the peace that comes from Jesus is not the same as the peace of this world (John 14:27). The world's peace depends on favorable circumstances: our getting our way, things going as expected, with maybe a few manageable problems. That sounds nice, but as soon as things go awry, this type of peace tends to dissipate, leaving us anxious and fretful.

By contrast, the peace that Jesus brings helps us face troubling circumstances without becoming swallowed up by anxiety or anger or fear. It brings a quiet confidence to our hearts that guides us as we face challenging decisions. It's a peace that depends not on the events of our day but on the boundless love of the Lord: "I belong to Christ, and I know that he will never abandon me!"

Peace with Ourselves. Perhaps an Easter story with St. Peter can give us a glimpse into the kind of peace Jesus wants to give us (John 21:15-19). On Holy Thursday, Peter, the "Rock" of the Church had denied even knowing the Lord. Now, here he was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, perhaps alone with Jesus for the first time since the resurrection. All kinds of thoughts were probably swirling in his mind—and none of them positive. "How could Jesus ever trust me again? Look at how I failed him. There's no way I could ever lead the Church!"

But Jesus cut through Peter's guilt and shame by asking one simple question: "Do you love me?" (John 21:15). He asked the question three times, in fact, leading Peter to admit, "You know that I love you" (21:17).

Jesus didn't need to hear Peter say, "I love you" three times. Rather, Peter needed to say it over and over. He needed to see that despite his act of cowardice and denial, he honestly did love Jesus. And that was enough for the Lord. Peter didn't have to perform arduous acts of atonement to set himself straight, and neither do we. He didn't need to remain locked in guilt, and neither do we. All he needed was to rediscover his love for Jesus, and so do we. When Peter learned this, he was finally at peace with himself. No longer bound up in guilt or anger over his failure, he was free to lead the Church as Jesus had called him to.

None of us will be perfect disciples. There may be days in a row when we disappoint Jesus or someone close to us. But we are so much more than the sum of our mistakes and failings. We are more than the sum of our successes and breakthroughs. We are beloved of God, chosen and destined for heaven. Jesus isn't interested in reviewing all of our past sins. He isn't interested in questioning all of our current motivations. All he wants to do is point us to the love that we already have for him, and we'll find our way to peace in our hearts. And the more peaceful we are, the easier it will be to follow Jesus and fulfill his calling for us.

Peace with Each Other. Finally, Jesus' gift of peace is meant to spill over into our relationships with each other. Immediately after telling the disciples, "Peace be with you," Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). Jesus is sending us out, asking us to treat each other with the same mercy and love that he has shown us. It's a mercy that pulls down dividing walls of hostility, unforgiveness, and prejudice (Ephesians 2:14). It's a love that empowers us to love each other deeply and be at peace with one another.

Loving each other and forgiving each other is perhaps the most challenging aspect of our life as Christians. We know how difficult it is to love without conditions and

stipulations. We know how difficult it is to forgive someone who has hurt us. Our natural response is to lash out in anger, sink into guilt, or shrink back in resentment.

The only way we can overcome these patterns is to “let the peace of Christ” reign in our hearts (Colossians 3:15). If we can imagine what Peter and the others felt when Jesus stood before them, offering them unconditional forgiveness and endless friendship, we’ll find our hearts softening. If we can imagine ourselves in their place, knowing that Jesus tells us, “Neither do I condemn you,” we’ll find the grace to do the same with each other.

Peter’s own experiences with Jesus and his fellow disciples taught him that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). If we can dedicate ourselves to living in love and mercy, we’ll find ourselves more united with our friends, family members, and neighbors. We’ll even find ourselves becoming more peaceful around the people who trouble us!

Peace Be with You. During the season of Advent, we await the coming of Jesus, the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:5). At Christmas, we hear the angels announcing, “Peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus promised, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). And at the Last Supper, as a parting gift, he said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27).

Throughout his life, Jesus worked tirelessly to remove the obstacles that keep us from knowing peace with God, peace in our hearts, and peace with each other. Then on Easter Sunday, he announced that the promise had been fulfilled. Every obstacle to peace has been removed! Now Jesus stands before us as a forgiving Savior, not as a vengeful judge. He stands before us offering us his peace.

Let his words sink into your heart. Let the truth behind them find a home in you. “Peace be with you” is so much more than a pleasant greeting. It’s a promise and a gift from almighty God!