

Peace's Liberating Power of Forgiveness  
John 20:19-31  
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*Christ, be our peace, that we might see you, hear you, touch you, know you and be liberated by your peace and forgiveness as we embrace your Word. Amen.*

Every year on the second Sunday of Easter, we step back from our Easter exuberance to hear the concerns of Doubting Thomas, but more importantly to hear Christ's peace. This is the Sunday for quiet reassurance that Christ is alive and breathing peace on us, no matter what we see or don't see in the world around us. There are many who seem to have missed the message of peace. Many of say they are Christians and we will not judge, but if Christians are not liberating others with the peace and forgiveness of Christ, if they are not blessing others with love and kindness, perhaps they themselves are still in the cage, still in the dark tomb, the locked room of doubt and fear. And our message to all in the world who are living with xenophobia and bitterness and harsh judgment against others, those who are tearing others down instead of building up, who are stirring up conflict, instead of making peace, we say: Christ is alive and he is speaking peace to our souls. Christ is driving the dark of our doubt away, always bringing peace into the locked rooms of our lives where we are afraid and confused. More than ever, our world needs peace, needs to be freed by forgiveness to put peace in each other's hands, as the choir will sing a bit later.

I invite you now to imagine a night of great unrest for the disciples. It will not be hard. For we ourselves experience unrest. We let the troubles of our lives overwhelm our confident faith and turn it to doubt. We have trouble believing in God's goodness on the cloudy and stormy days of our lives. Back then some women disciples had reported an empty tomb, but there had been no confirmation. What might happen next? Will the authorities find us and kill us? And what of these stories they've heard from their friends – is Jesus really alive? Can they trust what they have not seen with their own eyes?

### John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you.”** <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”** <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, **“Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”** <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, **“We have seen the Lord.”** But he said to them, **“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”**

<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you.”** <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, **“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”** <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, **“My Lord and my God!”** <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”** <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The doors were locked, but Jesus came in anyway and said, “Shalom.” This shalom is for them, to calm them, to reassure them. Then he showed them the evidence of his wounds. They rejoice in seeing him. He gives them peace again, and with it a charge. The second “shalom” is the one they and we must bear to the world. Jesus was the one sent. Now he is sending them, but first he breathes on them. The wind-breath-spirit (pneuma) is given them. That is no small moment. As those who follow Jesus we are given peace into our souls and by his Spirit we bear peace to the world. But that’s not all. Jesus then gives the power

of forgiveness – a huge gift and burden. Do you know the power of forgiveness? Do you know the release you can give yourself and others by offering forgiveness, especially to those who do not deserve it. That’s what Christ offers us – that is the essence of his peace – and he says, as the Father sent me, so I send you. Give people the peace of your forgiveness, instead of blaming. Give those who have betrayed you or forgotten you the peace of your forgiveness. You have the power – not to supercede’s God’s power, but you have more power than you think.

Know Christ’s peace in the depths of your soul, so you can cling tenaciously to that peace, when you’ve been hurt. There is great peace in laying our bitterness aside. There’s a concept of “double sorry” that can work well for two people who both understand that when things start to go sour, they quickly rush to say sorry simultaneously, and in the humility and humor of that moment are then liberated to talk about what it was that started the silly argument. (Option B by Sheryl Sandberg) To fully embrace Christ’s peace is a process of trusting his love to be the One thing that completes us, that fills us, that heals us. Sometimes we want to reserve a little spot for our justified anger or blame toward others. We want to reserve that spot as point of pride, thinking too highly of ourselves. What we need is for Christ’s breath, spirit to enter that spot and heal it. With Christ’s peace in us, giving us the benefit of the doubt, we can give others the benefit of the doubt. Not to be hurt over and over again, but to be free. Be liberated as you liberate others.

But we like to cling to our doubts about Christ’s peace. We like to think there are some wounds he cannot heal, so we hold them back. We like to cling to our doubt, because skepticism is the intellectual way these days, and we educated people value our minds. Smart people question things like Thomas did. Smart people need hard evidence. Science. Fact. Evidence. Unless I see the evidence of his wounds and touch them, I will NOT believe. Like Jack Nicholson’s character in the movie, *Bucket List* when the two guys talk of faith and Jack says with a smirk, “Oh, I admire you people with faith. I just can’t get my head around it. And Morgan Freeman’s character says, “Well, maybe your head’s in the way.” Dr. Francis Collins, the Director of the Genome Project, admits that his intellect

was in the way of believing for many years. It was his clinical contact with real human suffering that made him question his agnosticism. And as he read *Mere Christianity* and began to seriously ponder the Christian faith, he came to a point of believing more than doubting – just like Thomas.

The best thing about this story of Doubting Thomas is that it gives us the benefit of the doubt. The benefit of Thomas' doubt is that all of us know Jesus embraces us, even when we have our doubts. Christ offers him a chance to touch. We don't know if he does or not. But we do know Thomas e just needed to express his doubts. Peace be with you, Thomas. Peace to all the doubters of the world. Here I am, Christ says. I am here for you. It is okay that you are struggling to believe. The peace of Christ overwhelms him and heals him, and he utters a most profound statement of faith: My Lord and My God. But Jesus says that we are blessed if we can believe without seeing. We are benefited all the more to believe in the Resurrection of the body and the life everlasting with no evidence but the witness of scripture, the church through the generations, and our faith.

Jesus is understanding of Thomas, and he is willing to engage him at the level of his doubt. Yet He charges him to believe. I think believing is an act of our will, more than an ascent of the heart or mind. We have evidence but not proof. And our evidence is Christ's peace, the peace we experience in worship, the peace we experience in prayer, the peace we experience in the beauty of nature. The peace that passes all understanding when we walk through a heavy grief and are surrounded by the love of our friends. The peace that still our souls when our lives feel like dark rooms, full of fear and confusion. To all who feel bound, locked up in a cage of doubt or despair, and to all of us who are called to share Christ's peace with a hurting world, I want to share part of Maya Angelou's poem:

A free bird leaps on the back  
Of the wind and floats downstream  
Till the current ends and dips his wing  
In the orange suns rays  
And dares to claim the sky.

But a BIRD that stalks down his narrow cage  
Can seldom see through his bars of rage  
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
So he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill  
Of things unknown but longed for still  
And his tune is heard on the distant hill for  
The caged bird sings of freedom.

Fifty years ago this week, Martin Luther King was assassinated. You've heard he had a dream. You've heard he said that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." But have you ever heard that he boldly said many times, "I'd rather be dead than afraid." It is fear that binds us, and faith that liberates us. We have freedom as we sing of freedom from the cage that binds. We have peace as we make peace with others. We have forgiveness as we forgive others. Church named Peace, live into your name. Do not doubt but believe that you are blessed with the spiritual power to forgive and to breathe Christ's peace into this fractured world.