

I want to begin with the simplest of gospel truths: Because Jesus died for your sins and was raised to life to make you right with God, you may have peace. Jesus repeats the greeting “Peace be with you” three times in these 13 verses, and this theme fills the whole passage. Because the risen Jesus bore on His hands and side the marks of His death, your sins may be forgiven, and you may be glad when you see the Lord. The whole reason why John wrote His gospel was so that by knowing these things, you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and so that by believing, you may have life in His name. Believe that Jesus died for you, and that He was raised for you, and you may have life and peace.

The peace that Jesus extends to His disciples comes in the form of a greeting, but Jesus is doing far more than simply saying “hello”. When Jesus says “Peace be with you.”, He is not expressing a wish, but *pronouncing* and even *bringing about* a reality, like when He says “Be healed” or “Lazarus, come forth”. Jesus brings with Him the peace that He announces.

This peace includes the idea of a lack of war, or a cessation of hostilities, but is more about the positive blessing of a right relationship with God.¹ Peace includes ideas of calmness, rest, and the absence of conflict, anxiety, cowardice, and fear. When Jesus promised to leave His peace with His disciples back in John 14:27, He gave them peace in order to calm their troubled and fearful hearts. Where the problem is troubled hearts, the answer is peace.

In our passage today, we see the peace of Jesus directed against several different heart-troubling realities. In verse 19, the disciples are afraid of the Jews, which is why they're meeting behind locked doors. They're afraid that the Jews might seize them and kill them like they killed Jesus, and their fear was based on a very real possibility.

So how does Jesus conquer this fear of death? By appearing to them after His own death, yet full of life. Jesus' victory over death shows the disciples that they have nothing to fear, even if they are killed. And as a result, the disciples aren't *fearful* anymore, but *glad* (v.20). Of course, it isn't faithless to take wise precautions, and so the doors are locked the next week (v. 26), but the fear isn't mentioned. Same action, but a completely different attitude, which changes everything.

Look carefully, though: Jesus doesn't say “Your fears are irrational or groundless. Nobody is trying to hurt you.” Jesus doesn't want you to *deny* your fears. The possibility of death is still hanging over their heads, and the possibility of suffering and death is very real for you, too. But what Jesus gives you is a faith that *overcomes* the fear. Death is still a reality for the Christian; but the sting is gone. Suffering is still *real*, but it isn't *fearful* anymore. Don't fear those who can kill the body; fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

1 Morris, Leon. *NICNT: The Gospel According to John*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 584.

This ties in to the **second** thing that troubles their hearts. When Jesus shows them His wounds, He is not just showing them that evil men can't harm them anymore. He is *also* reminding them that His sacrificial, atoning death meant that they had peace with God, too. (Isaiah 53!). Not only should you have peace regarding physical death, but you should also believe that you have peace with God, who has forgiven your sins through the blood of Jesus. This is why John, especially, focuses on Jesus' side. Other gospels mention hands and feet, but John specifically calls attention to the spear-wound in Jesus' side, where the blood and water had rushed out. And as our readings from both Acts and Revelation remind us, sins are forgiven through the shed blood of Jesus.

The Risen Jesus overcomes both the fear of physical death by His physical resurrection, and the fear of spiritual death by atoning for our sins. The wages of sin is death, but Jesus took our death on Himself, so that we might have life by believing in His name. This is the good news of the resurrection! Sins forgiven, death defeated, peace with God! That's the gospel in seven words right there!

But not only does this passage look *back* to the cross; it also looks *forward* to the Church's mission. Jesus says "Peace be with you" three times; *first*, in the context of worship, moving the disciples from fear to faith, resulting in gladness when they saw the Lord. That's worship: being glad when you see the Lord. The *second* time Jesus says "Peace be with you" comes in the context of *mission*. Look at v. 22: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

Notice also that this gives us the link between worship and mission: we worship Jesus as forgiven sinners, and then we proclaim forgiveness of sins to others (v.23). Here's how it happens: when fear of death and fear of judgment are overcome by faith in the risen Christ, you are set free to forget yourself and live for others.

But many people struggle when it comes to participating in God's mission. Their hearts are troubled, and they don't have peace for two reasons. First, they think "Who am I to tell other people how to live their lives? Why should anyone listen to me?" Think of Timothy, or Jeremiah. They are troubled about *authority*. The second reason has to do with *ability*. "I'm not very good at talking to others or sharing my faith. I can't speak for God." Think of Moses, for example.

But notice how God brings peace to both of these fears. He answers the *authority* question in verse 21 by giving the disciples His official commissioning. *You are just as authorized to announce the good news as Jesus was*. Did you catch that? You speak with the same authority that Jesus had. If you doubt that, your witness will always be timid and weak. But if you believe Jesus, your fear will be swallowed up by peace, and your witness will be marked by *boldness*.

And in verse 22, Jesus overcomes the lack of *ability* when He breathes on them and says “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Because you are a disciple of the risen Christ, you are authorized to act in Jesus' name, *and* you have been *empowered* by the gift of the Holy Spirit so that you are *enabled* to act in Jesus' name. You are so worried about engaging in mission, but Jesus says: “Peace be with you.” He gives the Church *peace* for her mission by giving her *authority* and *ability*.

And then we get to verse 23, which has puzzled many people, because it seems to give tremendous power to the disciples: power to forgive sins, and power to withhold forgiveness. And in order to make sense of this verse, some people reduce the *power*, and they say that the church is simply *recognizing* forgiveness or unforgiveness, rather than *granting* it. “God writes the declaration,” they might say, “and the Church simply reads it out loud.”

Others in the Church reduce the *people*, and say that the power to grant or withhold forgiveness is really there, it just belongs to a select group, such as the apostles, for example. Now, bishops or the Pope, or the pastor or the elders are the ones who can forgive or retain sins.

But neither of these options (reducing the *power* or reducing the *people*), neither of these do justice to what the text actually says, in large part because they miss the connection with the end of verse 22. The reason why such amazing power rests with the Church is because Jesus has given them the Holy Spirit. The power is there, because God Himself is there, through His Spirit. When the Church forgives or withholds sins, it is not just a bunch of humans taking action. It is the Spirit-filled, Christ-authorized Church, the body of Christ, who grants or withholds forgiveness. So you can't separate God on one side, and the Church on the other. God indwells the Church by His Spirit, and God works and speaks *through the Church*.

And it isn't just special *individuals* in the Church that are given this power, because it isn't just special individuals who receive the Spirit! It's not the *apostles* that Jesus appears to; it is the *disciples*, all the men and women who follow Jesus. It is the Spirit-filled Church as a whole that Jesus is speaking to.

Notice that this means that Jesus isn't talking about “confessing your sins to one another” as *individuals* in this passage. The Bible does talk about that elsewhere, and it's an implication and even an application of this passage, but it isn't what He's talking about *here*. So when your friend comes and confesses to you, and you remind him of God's forgiveness, that's a wonderful Christian privilege at work, but it isn't what Jesus is talking about here.

What Jesus is talking about are those times when the Church makes a declaration *as a Church* regarding forgiveness. For us, this is what goes on earlier in the service when after we confess our sins, we hear God's pardoning words. We read a promise of forgiveness from God's

Word, but then that promise is applied specifically to you, based on your repentance and trust in Christ. God has given the promise in general, but He's given the Church the authority to *apply* the promises of forgiveness to specific people. And when the Spirit-filled Church announces the forgiveness of sins, you can have the peace of knowing for certain that your sins are forgiven, because this is exactly what Jesus authorized the Church to do, and this is one of the reasons why He breathed on the Church and gave her the Holy Spirit.

And so in our Church, the minister or elder who leads the service is the one who reads the promise and assures you of forgiveness, but this moment in our service is not completed and fulfilled until all God's people say, *Amen*. Did you realize how significant that word is? The minister or elder is acting as a representative, not as himself (which, incidentally, is why I wear a robe. The robe covers up "CJ", and signals that I am not acting as myself, because "CJ" by himself doesn't have the power to forgive sins). The congregation also plays an important role, because forgiveness is given to the Church, not to some special class of individuals within the Church. So when the Church says "Amen", she is living out v. 23. The Church forgives sins, based on the *work* of Christ, according to the *Word* of Christ.

And withholding forgiveness happens when the Church declares by the preaching of the Word, by the testimony of her confessions or statements of faith, and in the disciplinary act of excommunication, that forgiveness is only found in Jesus Christ, so that if your words or actions show that you are not a follower of Jesus, then you are still in your sins, and they are not forgiven. But, as John Calvin said, forgiveness is mentioned first, because that's the heart of the Church's message. That's what we are excited about: In Christ, sins *are* forgiven, so that you can have peace with God. Yes, outside of Christ, sins are not forgiven; so come to Christ! That's our message!

One last clarification: this only describes the Spirit-filled Church acting in step with the Spirit. If the Church ever gets it wrong, which she has and sometimes does, heaven is not bound by the words that a Church speaks *apart from* the Spirit. The Church really does have the ability to act in the Spirit's power, but the Church is not in charge of the Spirit. God never says, "Well, if it were up to me, you'd be forgiven. But since the Church said "no", I guess you're stuck." Even when the Church gets it wrong, God still gets it right. But *ordinarily*, since God has chosen to speak through the Church by His Spirit, when the Church forgives sins, they are forgiven, and where the Church withholds forgiveness, it is withheld.

Well, the third "peace be with you" is spoken, as you might have guessed, in the context of *community*. The disciples are gathered together, but the peace that they have with one another is broken by Thomas' unbelief. He wasn't there on Resurrection Sunday, he hasn't seen what they've seen, and so he doesn't share their gladness and peace. "We've seen the Lord." They said. "I will

never nohow believe until I see and touch Him.” Thomas replies. They are sharply divided; the community isn't at peace, because they don't share the gladness of the Resurrection.

Until Jesus comes, that is. Just as before, Jesus enters their presence despite the locked doors, and says once again “Peace be with you.” He turns to Thomas, demonstrating not only that He is alive, not only that it really is Him in the flesh, but also that He has supernatural knowledge of Thomas' doubt. And by His presence, He puts an end to any further excuse for unbelief. “Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Thomas does believe, and makes a stunning confession: “My Lord and my God!” The early disciples believed not only that Jesus was Lord and Christ, but that He was God come in the flesh. And they didn't believe this because they were gullible or uneducated, but because Jesus overpowered every doubt.

And then in verse 29, Jesus thinks of us. His words to Thomas might be a question, as the ESV has it, or it might be a statement, but either way, Jesus pronounces a special blessing on those who do not see Him with their eyes like Thomas did, and yet believe. And how is it that we believe even without seeing?

In verses 30-31, John tells us that He wrote His book specifically so that we can have that blessing that Jesus promised, so that we can share in the peace that Jesus brings, so that we can believe in Jesus based on the written record of eyewitness reports, and so that by believing, we may have life in Jesus' name.

Many people do apologetics, have long conversations and arguments, debate and persuade using all sorts of reasons and proofs, but sometimes we forget to begin at the beginning. If you want someone to believe in Jesus, have them read John! What's the best way to convince someone that something tastes good? Don't try to convince them with words; have them take a bite! You don't need to prove that the Bible is the Word of God; it contains the proof in itself. This book gives life. Read it with others, and watch them come alive.

Here in this text, Jesus offers you a three-fold peace: peace in His presence (that's worship), peace in being sent by the Father (that's mission), and peace in the face of doubt (that's community). The marks on Jesus' body give you peace. The resurrection of Jesus gives you peace. The presence of Jesus gives you peace. The gift of the Holy Spirit gives you peace. The promise of forgiveness of sins gives you peace. And the vision of Christ, in the flesh for Thomas, through the written word for us, this vision of Jesus Christ gives you peace. So believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and may peace be with you.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*