

2nd S. of Easter 4/7/2024
John 20:19-31 B

“PEACE BE WITH YOU!”

In his later years, Martin Luther was subject to periods of gloom and depression. One day he seemed particularly gloomy, so his wife, Katy, dressed herself in black mourning clothes. When Luther demanded to know why she was in mourning, she said, "I thought God died." Need to say, Luther got the message.

Do your emotions and feelings tell you, does the devil ever whisper in your ear, that God is dead? Walking by faith through this valley of the shadow of death, it is easy for us to believe God is dead. We often feel that God cannot help, that He cannot come to our rescue. We often feel that we are as a helpless orphan, left to fend for ourselves.

This is how the disciples felt on the evening of that first Easter day. The Evangelist John tells us: *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 (v. 19)*. They were all too aware of Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, death and, His resurrection.

They knew this would happen. Jesus predicated His betrayal and arrest, His passion and death, and, always, each and every time He told them of His death, He told them of His resurrection of the 3rd day! The woman had come from Joseph's tomb with the report that it was empty, and the words of the angel: *“He has risen; He is not here” (Mk 16:6)*. Peter and John had run to the tomb, and found it empty, just as the women had said.

Instead of walking by faith, remembering the words of Jesus, the disciples walked by FEAR. In the face of seemingly overwhelming odds,

fear replaced faith in the disciples. Instead of looking with hope, they looked with fear.

The Evangelist John continues the events of that first Easter evening: *Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you"* (v. 19). Notice what the Savior does, or maybe I should say, does **not** do: Jesus does not scold them for their fear. Jesus does not condemn their unbelief. With these words of Gospel, our Lord forgives them for their lack of trust, and then reassures them that He has not abandoned them. He is alive and He is with them. Jesus personally came to them in His resurrected Body, to give them the hope which only the resurrection can give.

The disciples were fearful and sorrowful. They had no hope. Our Lord Jesus Christ removes their fear and strengthens their faith by coming to them. He, risen from the grave, appeared to them. He showed them the deadly wounds sin had afflicted on His hands and His side. By His appearance and words, He drove out all fear. And, with that fear, the chaos, confusion, and conflict which only sin could cause.

Dear Friends in Christ, does your fear ever overwhelm you? Are you, inside, confused and frustrated, wondering if God is all powerful why is there so much uncertainty? Does it just seem some days that God is dead?

All of this fear, this uncertainty, this confusion, and this sorrow, is because of sin. The disciples, apart from Jesus Christ, merely did what any human would do when they are left to look out for themselves -- they turned to look, not to God, but inside themselves. And what did they find? The same thing you and I and all people find when we look to ourselves -- nothing but fear and no cause, no reason to even have the slightest hope.

To people like you and I, people afraid, people so filled with fear that we even try to lock ourselves in away from that which frightens us, our Loving Savior comes, not to condemn us, but to say, "*Peace be with you!*"

Who but Jesus Christ Himself could satisfy the deep longing of the human heart in our confusion and sorrow? He came to the disciples to strengthen their faith. This He did for them as He does for us -- by forgiving our sins. If we are to have life in heaven, then the sin which separates us from God must be done away with forever. Sin must be atoned for and we must be set free from its wages of death. This is what Jesus Christ. The Son of God took upon Himself the sins of every sinner. By His life, by His suffering, crucifixion, and death, Christ won forgiveness for us. Nothing now separates us from God. Our hope comes from nothing other than the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross.

In this season of Easter, we behold in faith the empty tomb of Easter morning. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News of hope. Easter is a powerful reminder for us that, although life is difficult and may even be quite painful at times, God still has the upper hand. The empty tomb proclaims that God is victorious even over death, the most powerful and fearsome enemy we have.

But yet, as we live upon this earth, we are daily reminded of the burden of living in a fallen world. It is so easy to think like Luther, that God is dead, or at least, He doesn't much care about us. We may be tempted to become like the disciples and allow fear to replace our faith. But, the Lord Jesus Himself will not permit the evil foe to have any power over us. So, to keep us steadfast in our faith, the Lord gives us the means of grace.

It is true Jesus won forgiveness for all of our sins on the cross. But, He distributes it to us -- He makes that forgiveness our very own -- through

His Word, the visible Word of the Sacraments and the spoken Word of the Office of the Keys.

We use keys every day. Keys open doors and keys close doors. We call Holy Absolution "The Office of the Keys" because it opens heaven's door to us through the forgiving of our sins. And, it closes heaven's door to those who do not repent of their sin so long as they do not repent. Through the Office of the Keys, Jesus says to each of us: "Peace be with you," forgiving each of us our sins and comforting us that heaven's door is open, unlocked, to us.

Perhaps, we can understand this better if we look at the Christian life like a plant, especially as the nice weather has put flowers and gardens, wheat and sunflowers, on our minds. The roots are faith, that which unites us to Christ and causes us to trust and hope in Him alone. It is in baptism that we are given the gift of faith. Through the washing of the water, God plants faith within us. As the water and sunshine cause the plant to grow, so God's Word of forgiveness -- the Office of the Keys and the Sacrament of the Altar -- cause our faith to grow. Then, the plant blooms, so that all may see its beauty. And, so it is with us. With faith given to us in baptism, nurtured by God's grace, we bloom in good works, which glorify our Father in heaven and serve our neighbor.

In our Introit for this Sunday, we pray: *Like newborn babies, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation (1 Pe 2:2).* As newborn babies, desire milk to grow strong, so we desire God's grace to that we may grow strong in our faith and put to death the temptation of the flesh and the lie of the devil that would have us think God does not care for us. Through the Word, God forgives us our sins, giving to us the hope and certainty of an eternal home where we will see God with our own eyes.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.