

“The Peace of Christ Be with You”

John 20:19-31 ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin¹), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ 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." ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ 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." ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe¹ that Jesus is the Messiah,² the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

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If you could just use your imagination for a minute and put yourself in that room with the disciples that evening when Jesus appeared to them. They were there, doors closed, fearing for their lives. Jesus had been crucified the day before yesterday. Pilate had found him innocent of any charge, but the Jews, the Jewish authorities in particular, had wanted Jesus dead and his followers in the least disbanded. Pilate had enthroned Jesus on the cross entitling him “King of the Jews”; an act which offended those Jewish authorities greatly. Yet, Pilate had realized that Jesus bore an authority which was as Jesus had said, “not of this world.” Pilate wanted that authority noted by the Jewish authorities. The disciples were hoping that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Messiah, who would deliver the people from the Romans and establish the Kingdom of God. Yet, their hopes turned to disillusionment as this friend they loved was crucified. Yet, then came Sunday morning, the morning of the Third day of the events, the first day of the week (that is significant to note for it also symbolizes the 8th day of Creation which is the day of New Creation); that morning some of the women went to the tomb and encountered Jesus resurrected and so did two others of them on the Road to Emmaus. I suspect they are pondering whether to go to Galilee where the women said Jesus would meet them.

This small group of strangers who had grown to become the best of friends had been on a monster of an emotional rollercoaster torn with fear, doubt, and faith....and then Jesus appears out of nowhere, King Jesus, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, Jesus their Beloved, Jesus their Lord and God risen

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from the dead. Then King Jesus says to them not “Grab your swords. Let’s get ready to rumble,” but rather, “Peace be with you.” Upon seeing his wounds, they become overcome with exceeding joy because they were seeing him.

Yet, Jesus appeared to them with the purpose of conveying his Kingdom ministry to them. He again said “Peace be with you. (and I paraphrase) As the Father sent me with all his authority to establish the Kingdom of God so also I am sending you forth in my own authority to establish the Kingdom of God (and I will be with you).” And then he performed an act of New Creation. He breathed upon them the breath of New Creation life that is in him, the Holy Spirit. Just as in Genesis God breathed into Adam the breath of life, the *Nashmah Chayyim*, so that Adam became a living being, so Jesus here breathes the breath of New Creation life, into these children of Adam, that they might become the children of God. Then Jesus sends them forth not to go to war to establish his Kingdom but rather imbued with the authority to forgive or not to forgive the sins of others.

Weird kingdom, eh? Jesus has come to them, to us to create a new humanity marked by his peace, his own presence with them/us. His peace is a gift. It is the breath of the new life of his resurrection freely given to his followers as the presence of the Holy Spirit in us just as life is in us. It is a peace that is established and which grows in and through our forgiving the sins of others. Yet, it is a peace which can be polluted if we retain, or grasp upon the sins of others through judgmentalism and refusing to do the work of forgiveness and rather intentionally holding on to hate and grudge. Jesus’ Kingdom truly is a different sort of kingdom. The peace of Christ is the direct result of the good news of his kingdom come, of God having acted within history to save his creation in, through, and as Jesus of Nazareth the Christ, our risen Lord. The Christian faith, the Church, is not about a system of personal beliefs or ideas and ideals. It is about the peace of Christ, God’s grace, embodied in human community – basically, a new humanity made alive by God’s sending, giving, and placing his very self into the old humanity making it anew.

To switch gears a moment here, a few years back we started doing something here in our worship service that I think is the most important thing that we do on Sunday morning and that is to extend the peace of Christ to one another after we together proclaim the Gospel. When we extend the peace of Christ to one another it is not some religious way to simply say good morning to each other. We do it to give body and voice to what Jesus himself is here doing in our midst by the work of the Holy Spirit. He is making us to be the new humanity that will come to it’s completion at his return. To say to another person, “the peace of Christ be with you” is to say “I want everything that Jesus came, lived, died, and was raised for to take effect in you.” It is to say, “I want you to know personally the steadfast love and faithfulness of God the Father.” It is to say, “I want you to be filled with the Holy Spirit and made new.” “I want you to know peace of mind and peace in your relationships in such a way as only God your maker can give it.” It is to say, “You are forgiven. Indeed, there is nothing that separates you from the love of God in Jesus Christ except your own refusal to shake my hand or if you shun my voice.”

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This act of extending the peace of Christ seemed to start making its rounds in the 90's back in the days when I was in seminary as a rebirth of an early church tradition. It was amazing to hear the stories that ministers had and still have in getting their congregations to turn to one another one Sunday morning and say, “the peace of Christ be with you.” Most churches had no problem with turning to the people sitting around them and saying “Good morning.” But to say, “the peace of Christ be with you,” was a different matter and resistance to it I would say verged on the demonic. There have actually been instances where church members have secretly organized to get rid of their minister because he introduced “the peace of Christ” into the worship service. I was overjoyed at the way it was received here. When we first did it, I said, “Please, stand and turn and greet one another in the peace of Christ.” I was expecting that you would just turn to those seated nearby and say it like they do in the big churches that do it; but, not here. Here, there seemed to be a spontaneous eruption (and I remember who started it) of having to go to every person here and extend the peace so that each received it from all. I was caught off guard by that just like the disciples were that night when Jesus appeared to them and I truly rejoiced at what I saw. In our midst it was evident that Jesus is here, that he truly is where the Gospel is proclaimed in Truth and truly received and embodied. That act of spontaneity said to me “Jesus is here; these people really are being made new; my efforts won't be in vain.”

There is a song about the peace of Christ that I'd like to share with you and maybe we can sing it together. Glen Soderholm wrote it. The chorus of it is what Bill and Elizabeth play while we extend the peace of Christ to one another. It's a reflection upon Psalm 133 which reads: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.”

The Peace of Christ

May the peace of Christ be with and also with you.

May the peace of Christ be with you in all you do.

Its like the precious oil that flows down Aaron's beard.

And as dew falls from the mountain

The blessing bursts forth here.

So we throw down all our weapons and the things we long to control.

And call now for Jesus' presence

To restore our very souls.

We turn now from the solitary
to the dance of kindred hearts and laughing with each other
as each one takes their part.

The peace of Christ be with you. Amen.

