

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Peace Be with You**

John 20:19-23

Back in 2006-2007, there was a show on The Learning Channel devoted to helping families overcome their thorniest problems. The show was hosted by Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, a theologian, counselor, and author who acknowledged that the show was partly an expression of his own struggle to come to terms with his parents' divorce. In each episode, Rabbi Shmuley led one family through an intensive journey in which the individuals took an honest look at their problems and found the determination and skills necessary to bring about reconciliation and healing. The name of the show was *Shalom in the Home*. In fact, to get to those who needed his help, Rabbi Shmuley drove around the country in what he called his shalom-mobile, a huge Airstream trailer in which the rabbi slept, counseled patients, and spied on their behavior through a closed-circuit TV of sorts. As the title, and the name of the car, indicated, Rabbi Shmuley's goal was to help families across America bring shalom into their homes.

According to this morning's Scripture from the Gospel of John, when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, the first word out of his mouth was "Shalom." It's a Hebrew word that means "peace." "Peace be with you," is Jesus' greeting to his followers. Of course, in this case the circumstances made it much more than just a conventional greeting. This isn't just a friendly hello from someone who happened to be in the neighborhood and decided to drop by. This is a word of restoration from the mouth of the one whom they had followed, but after his crucifixion was given up for dead. Now Jesus' disciples thought they too might be in danger, so they huddled in fear behind locked doors.

But Christ comes looking for them. Neither a rock tomb nor a locked door can stop the reconciling love of God from accomplishing its purpose. The risen Jesus appears out of nowhere and stands among his followers. And the first thing he says to them: "Peace." "Peace be with you." Who knows how many times he had said it to them, or they had said it to him, during his earthly ministry. But this time, this place, this moment, was very different. Now they were on this side of the resurrection. God's shalom was underway. The peace of God's kingdom had invaded the here and now. The leading edge of the world to come had arrived in the present world.

This "peace" isn't merely "peace of mind," a kind of inner serenity that anchor's one's heart in the midst of life's trials and troubles. Though that kind of peace is certainly important, *shalom* has more of a relational sense. As one person has put it, "It expresses safety and security in relationship, wholeness and welfare in community, and health and justice in bodily, familial, economic, and political relationships."<sup>1</sup> Shalom assumes that's there's a struggle, a battle, going on, and that now injustice is being confronted and deliverance is underway.

So when Jesus spoke to his disciples about peace, he meant that God's saving power was on the move in the world. Peace meant that what they and their ancestors had spent centuries waiting for had finally become a reality. Shalom, God's gift of peace, was here.

And with it, all the things God had promised: The forgiveness of sins; the restoration of his people and the whole creation; reconciliation between enemies; no more hatred, violence, and destruction; no more hunger, poverty, or injustice; no more sickness, suffering, and death. God had raised Jesus from the dead. The new creation had dawned. Harmony and wholeness had been sent from above. God had come to set things right in his world. "Peace be with you," says Jesus.

In many branches of the Christian church, weekly services have traditionally included an act of worship called the passing of the peace. This isn't primarily a time to say howdy or to catch up on what others have been doing during the past week. Rather, it's an opportunity for the individuals in a congregation to express, often verbally or through a physical gesture, that they are members of the one body of Christ. During and after COVID-19, many congregations suspended or altered the way that they practice the passing of the peace. In some cases, rather than offering handshakes or hugs, worshipers were advised to do a fist bump, or bump elbows, or wave the peace sign at one another. Whatever form the passing of the peace takes, it's a sign of how we have been reconciled to the Father through the death of his Son, and therefore also reconciled with one another. It's a visible demonstration that as believers, we are called to live in the peace of God and to share that peace with each other.

Preacher Thomas Long tells about something that happened during the passing of the peace in a church where his wife once served as pastor. There was a couple in the church that was having marital difficulties. They used to be faithful in their attendance, but as the problems in their marriage became more stressful, he stopped coming, and only she would come. She would sit there all by herself and cry through the hymns. It soon became pretty widely known that he had moved out, and their marriage looked irretrievably broken.

Long says that during one of its services, the congregation was singing a hymn, when he suddenly heard the ushers gasp. Long looked around, and there was the husband. He came and stood at the end of her pew. She took one look at him and scooted all the way to the other end. And there they sat in isolation. Well, the time came for the passing of the peace. He turned and walked toward her at the other end of the pew and said, "The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you." She looked at him suspiciously, but then she put out her hands, and said, "And the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you." Something happened. They sat down next to each other. He reached out and patted her hand. And when the benediction was pronounced, they joined hands and went home together to work it out. Long says, "They had been given a peace they could not create on their own."

True, as Long points out, not every couple in that congregation put things back together. But this experience, he says, is a sign of that day when God, in his reconciling love, will fully accomplish his saving purpose. The new humanity in Christ will be complete, and God will be all in all. Peace—God's shalom—will fill the new heaven and new earth that God has promised.<sup>2</sup>

The peace of God, the peace that will reach to the ends of the earth when Christ comes again, begins in a room full of fearful disciples whose hopes have been smashed by the execution of Jesus. They aren't sure what the future may hold. All they know is that for now, it's best to lay low, praying that what happened to Jesus won't happen to them.

But Jesus has other plans for them. He shows them his hands and side, and their fear turns into joy. It truly is the Lord. Again he says, "Peace be with you." Then he tells them, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." So what the disciples thought might be the end has suddenly become a new beginning. This is no conclusion. This is a commission. Jesus

commissions the church to continue and extend the work that God sent him to do. Jesus entrusts us with his ministry of forgiveness. Why? Because the peace of Christ, though certainly a gift to believers, is not meant just for believers. The Father who sent the Son so loves the world, not just a particular roomful of disciples. Therefore we can't be content just to pass the peace back and forth between ourselves. Passing the peace also means passing it on. It means passing it on to those who haven't heard about the new life that's available in Christ.

This new life as a child of God is a life of peace. And this peace is more than the absence of conflict. This peace is the presence of Christ. We often think of peace as something that will come after a particular thing has been accomplished, possessed, or overcome. If I can just finish this project, then I'll finally have peace. If I can just get a bigger house, then I'll finally have peace. If I can just get through my current troubles, then I'll finally have peace. But even after these things happen, that peace which we pursue remains elusive.

Notice that in today's Scripture, Jesus' disciples don't get peace as a reward for overcoming their fears. No, the risen Jesus comes to them with peace in the midst of their fears. "Peace be with you" isn't a blessing that Jesus pronounces on those who have first gotten it all together and know exactly how to fix the world. "Peace be with you" is Jesus' word to those who are helpless, frightened, and ready to be rescued. Where Christ is present, and Christ is received, there is peace.

This kind of peace, in its deepest and widest sense, is present in the community of those who trust in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit. True, we in the church often fall far short of the peace that God has given us through Christ. Our own life together in the fellowship of disciples is frequently a visible demonstration of disunity rather than a witness to wholeness, harmony, and justice. Yet, the peace of Christ still abides with us.

Thomas Long tells another story about a visit to a church where he had been invited to lead a special evening communion service. He says:

The church staff had planned this service to be educational as well as worshipful. The idea was that, first, the congregation would gather in the sanctuary and I would give a brief talk about the meanings of the Lord's Supper. Then, we would go into the fellowship hall and be seated around tables for the service itself.

At each table there would be the flour and other ingredients to form the dough for the communion loaves. The plan called for each table to prepare a loaf and, while the loaves baked in the ovens of the church kitchen, the people at each table were to engage in various exercises designed to get them talking about their experiences in the faith.

It was a good idea, but like many well-planned events, things looked better on the drawing board than they turned out in reality. There were problems. Children at many tables began to play in the baking ingredients, and white clouds of flour floated around the room coating everybody and everything. There were delays in the kitchen, and the communion bread baked with agonizing slowness. Some of the tables ran out of things to say; children grew weary and fussy; the room was filled with commotion and restlessness. The planners had dreamed of an event of excitement, innovation, peak learning, and moving worship. What happened was noise, exhaustion, and people making the best of a difficult situation. In other words, despite the rosy plans, it was the real church worshipping down there in the church basement.

Finally, the service ended, and, with no little relief, I was able to pronounce the benediction. "The peace of Christ be with you all," I said, and just as I did, a child's voice from somewhere in the room called out strong and true, "It already is."<sup>3</sup>

The good news is that even when it doesn't always look like it or feel like it, the peace of Christ really is with us. Christ has breathed the Holy Spirit on us, and has sent us to extend his peace, not only to one another, but to the world. Peace be with you.

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<sup>1</sup> Glen Harold Stassen, "Peace." In *Handbook of Themes for Preaching*, ed. James W. Cox (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 180.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Long, "Preaching from the Future toward the Present," a lecture at Duke Divinity School Convocation & Pastor's School, October 13, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Long, *Whispering the Lyrics* (Lima, Ohio: CSS, 1995) n.p.