

Sermon for Easter 2, Year B

The Text: John 20:19-31

Lord Jesus, help our hearts to be still and fill us with your peace as we hear the good news you bring to us.

Overcoming all obstacles! That really could be the title for our message today. Last week, Easter Sunday, we heard that Jesus had overcome death itself. That's the report the angels gave to the women as they saw the empty tomb. He is risen! (PAUSE) In today's gospel reading, situated on that very evening, we again hear that Jesus overcomes all obstacles. The disciples have gathered together with the doors locked, fearing for their own lives. But Jesus comes and stands among them. In His risen and glorified state, death, the rock of the tomb, the walls, and the locked doors of the house are not obstacles for Jesus. He comes to be present with His disciples.

And it is with His presence among His disciples that we see Jesus overcoming yet another obstacle – the obstacle of human frailty and lack of faith. Up until this point, Jesus' disciples have shown themselves to be seriously falling short in their life of faith. In Matthew's Gospel, Simon Peter pulls Jesus aside and gives Him a good old-fashioned dressing down after Jesus foretells His own suffering and death. In Luke, just after Jesus institutes His meal of Holy Communion, the disciples squabble amongst themselves about who is the greatest. In Mark and Matthew, they fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane instead of keeping watch and praying with Jesus. And, quite famously, Peter even *denies knowing* Jesus, not just once but *three times*. On the morning of Jesus' resurrection, their initial reaction to news of the empty tomb was

that the women's words seemed to be complete nonsense. In today's reading, we hear Thomas *refuse* to believe that Jesus had risen, as the other disciples had said. It's quite a list of failures from people we know to be leaders of the church!

So, when the risen Lord appears to the disciples inside the locked room, they have every reason to expect to be criticized and told off by Jesus for their lack of faith, for their failure to do what He has asked of them, and for their acts of self-centeredness.

But let's take a minute before we point the finger at the disciples. Let us not think of ourselves as any better. How many times has our own human frailty and lack of faith been an obstacle for us as we follow Jesus? What might our lists of failures look like? Is this the image of Jesus that we have – someone who is checking on us and shaking his head as he goes through our faults?

In today's Gospel, Jesus doesn't come to find fault, but to overcome all obstacles. The Lord of Life who overcame the tomb overcomes the locked door of the disciples' house. He overcomes their sin, so that God is in their presence to bring peace rather than judgment.

Jesus does that with His proclamation to the disciples: "Peace be with you" or literally, "Peace to you." After He said this, Jesus shows His disciples the marks in His hands where the nails had been driven through to the cross and the side of His body, pierced with the spear. Then Jesus says to them again: 'Peace to you'. Jesus' gift of peace and the marks of the cross on his body all go together as one. He pronounces peace to His disciples and then shows them the costly price at which He bought their peace—His hands and side, pierced by the nails and the spear. In this way, John shows that Jesus' words are an

absolution—the pronouncement of forgiveness of sins from Christ Himself.

But there's yet another obstacle—the absence of Thomas. However, Jesus doesn't let Thomas miss out on Jesus' blessing. He comes again, and rather than chastise Thomas, Jesus repeats His greeting of peace. Jesus even refers to Thomas' previous demands for proof by saying 'Put your finger here and see my hands and put your hand into my side. Don't be unbelieving, but believe.'

Jesus proclaims by his words and his wounds that the disciples – yes, even Thomas – receive God's forgiveness and peace. And he proclaims the same to us today. He has forgiven us all of our sins. The original Greek word for forgiveness actually means a releasing, a dismissal, a sending away from. That's what Jesus' proclamation of peace—the forgiveness of sins—means for us. His proclamation of forgiveness of sins are words that actually do something. They give to us a new identity; a new standing before God, because we are released from our sins which are taken away from us as if they were never committed. So rather than trembling before God's holy presence deserving of His anger and judgment, we are able to stand before our Heavenly Father as His freed child with a clear conscience. Our sins have been removed from you as far as the east is from the west, we hear in Psalm 103, or more concretely, as far as we are from the cross, some 2000 years ago.

Our sins are taken away and put on the Cross of Christ. And we know that through the Cross of Christ, we receive all the blessings that forgiveness of sins means: a new standing before God, the peace of God, eternal life, salvation, victory over sin, death and the devil!

Just as Jesus pointed to what HE DID when facing the faltering faith of his disciples, he points us to what he did when we remember our baptism, the time when Jesus exchanged our sinfulness for his holiness. As Luther put it,

Is not this a beautiful, glorious exchange, by which Christ, who is completely innocent and holy, not only takes upon himself another's sin, that is, my sin and guilt, but also clothes and adorns me, who am nothing but sin, with his own innocence and purity?

[we can therefore] say: I know of no more sins, for they are all lying on Christ's back...he takes them and drowns and smothers them in baptism and the cross..."

The gift of peace comes from God's promise to us – not through the strength of our faith. This becomes a living reality every time in worship when, as sinners, we exchange the peace of the Lord with each other. It's what happens every time in the Holy Communion liturgy when the pastor says: "The peace of the Lord be with you always" and the congregation responds with the 'Amen', in other words: "Yes, I believe this to be true, it is certainly so; I come as a sinner, yet this is no obstacle to Christ's peace as I am joined to him in this meal." Jesus' peace overcomes all obstacles.

(PAUSE)

So, what obstacles do you still experience in your life that rob you of your peace? Peace is certainly something we all need – especially in

our relationships, with our health, and with our future. Conflict with others, or uncertainty about the future can be some very serious obstacles to overcome in our life. They certainly have the power to destroy our peace. But Jesus also strengthens us by his body and blood to live as true members of his body, the church, as we face our own obstacles to peace.

In our conflicts with others, we have the privilege of sharing God's grace with those around us in the way we respond. Perhaps-when our spouse comes to us after an argument. Or, when our brother or sister in the faith hurts us with their words or actions. Maybe there is a serious conflict at work that makes life very tense. It might be when our kids let us down, or kids, when your parents are too harsh with you.

Perhaps this can be the prayer you bring to the risen Lord today. This kind of conflict might be the obstacle you are facing, as one of his disciples, the obstacle that is taking away your peace. Or perhaps you need his reassurance about your future and your health, as things seem uncertain.

Now, it's true that Jesus' peace didn't REMOVE all obstacles for the disciples – their lives were threatened throughout their ministry. But his peace is a gift that helps us overcome obstacles we face, obstacles that threaten to steal our peace from us.

Jesus' gift of peace is ours again today, as he meets us here. How might this peace you have received from Christ be something you can share with others? What would a peaceful response from you look like in your situation? If it's a conflict, how might Christ be calling you to share the words "Peace to you" with someone else? If it's about your future, how

might Christ be calling you to leave all things in his hands, trusting in his goodness?

Faltering faith and a sense of our own weakness are no obstacles for Christ. His peace is greater than all of these. Whatever your situation, may you be encouraged by the words of the Apostle Paul, who says, "The peace of God that passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus." Amen.