

This Sunday marks the first week of the season of Easter, which is 50 days from Easter Day up to, and including the Day of Pentecost. On Easter Sunday we experienced and remembered once again the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the highlight of the Christian year and the cornerstone of our faith. On Easter Sunday it was such a blessing to see so many people.

There is something exciting and mysterious about Easter...it lures people to church. People come with expectant hearts; they come knowing that they will hear the good news that Christ has been raised from the dead and that they too can enter this new life through their faith in Christ! This type of excitement and joy is contagious, but what happens in the weeks following Easter? What happens after the joy of Easter has started to wear off and we have entered back into the daily routines of our lives?

This is how we find the disciples after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Their Lord had been crucified and they didn't know what to do. Although Mary Magdalene told them that she had seen the risen Lord, none of them had witnessed this phenomenon for themselves and they did not yet believe.

In fact, instead of being concerned about the whereabouts of the risen Christ, they were concerned about protecting themselves and had locked themselves in a room. I wonder what Jesus thought about this. We would think that he must have been disappointed in the disciples. Many of them were not at the cross with him, but stood and watched him die from a distance. They betrayed him, they denied him, and they did not believe that he was back from the dead.

Instead of greeting the disciples with harsh words, Jesus Christ greeted them with peace. This could have been a situation of severe conflict, Jesus' best friends let him down, yet in Matthew 20 Jesus' first words to the disciples after his resurrection were, "Peace be with you." Even though this type of greeting was a common Jewish custom, I don't know if you or I could greet those that deserted us in our death with these same words. Also, Jesus said it twice. I think he did this to make sure the disciples knew that he forgave them.

It is very difficult for us to understand the type of peace that Christ offers to us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Our Scripture for today calls us to offer this same peace to others so that we can be reconciled to God and one another. We can be bearers of peace when we embody our faith in Jesus Christ.

The good news of Easter is about believing without seeing. It is about taking the Bible’s word for it that Christ rose from the dead. Sometimes we are not so easily convinced. In a world where we can all google; we have become self-professed experts in many fields. Our culture has shifted, and it has become the norm to only trust information that we have had time to thoroughly research ourselves. Thomas was no different than us. He wanted to see the risen Christ to truly believe in the resurrection.

I am so thankful that we serve a God who allowed Jesus to remain with the disciples after his resurrection so that they would believe. In fact, Jesus remained on the earth for forty days to prove to his disciples that he had in fact defeated death and to prepare them for the future. Jesus appeared to the disciples after coming through a locked door. He showed them his wounds and he commissioned them by breathing upon them the Holy Spirit.

But Thomas missed it. Can you imagine what that must have felt like? Thomas was probably deep in despair. He missed a once in a lifetime opportunity. From that moment on he knew he could not be one who said he was a witness to the resurrection. You think he would have believed his friends. But Thomas would not be convinced until he saw the risen Lord with his own eyes.

We are like Thomas in the way that we want assurance so that we can continue to believe in Jesus Christ. For Thomas this was probably his moment of renewal. He was now a witness of the risen Lord!

Last Sunday, we heard once again the resurrection story of Jesus Christ and that we too are charged to go forward to share that we also have “seen the Lord.” We can do that when we offer Christ’s peace to our neighbors.

The Holy Spirit continues to lead us forward in this important ministry. At a time when so many things seem to be at war in our lives, Christ calls us to a ministry of peace. Throughout each day we are faced with varying degrees of conflict from things that are ordinary to things that cause life-altering change. Just think about a typical day in your life and all the moments when you are faced with conflict. Daily we find ourselves in conflict with strangers, colleagues, neighbors, friends, and family, and even ourselves.

Conflict is not something new for Christians. In the Old Testament we see conflict everywhere. Our story as Christians begins with conflict with God through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. This story shows our need to be put back into a right relationship with God, a feat that is only made possible through the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Other conflicts include Cain and Abel, David and Goliath, and Joseph and his brothers to name of few.

In the New Testament we see conflict all around. The Pharisees were in conflict with Jesus. The disciples had conflict among themselves about who was the greatest. The apostle Paul had conflict with various churches, then later he was persecuted for being a Christian. Paul even had conflict within himself over what God was calling him to do.

The problem with conflict is that it leads to death: physical, emotional, and spiritual death. It causes physical death due to stress. It causes the emotional death of relationships with others. You may even begin to distance yourself from God and that is why conflict it is so dangerous.

When we have conflict between one another it causes us to be in conflict with God. This is true because when we are in conflict with our neighbors it takes our focus off of serving God. Have you ever been in a fight with someone or experienced the end of a relationship? This creates conflict that consumes us. When we are consumed by conflict we cannot be consumed with the love of Christ.

In Matthew 22 Jesus taught us that the greatest commandment was to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And the second commandment was to ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

So, the solution to this problem is what Jesus tells us to do, to love God and love our neighbors. We love our neighbors through offering them peace, even when we think they don’t deserve it. **When we offer our neighbors peace we find communion with God.**

Making peace with others is not something that is passive. It is hard work! It causes us to actively practice our faith. It is easy to be a Christian on Sunday, but what about the rest of the week when no one is watching? That is when we get ourselves in trouble because the way we handle conflict can either point people towards God or away from God.

Jesus Christ upheld this important practice of our faith. In Matthew 5:9 Jesus said: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” This means that when we are making peace with others we will be recognized by our faith and as children of God. That is a great way to be recognized! Also, people remember when we offer them peace, which may take the form of extravagant grace and forgiveness.

Just think about the major peacemakers you have heard of in our Christian faith: Mother Theresa fostered peace by living among the poorest of the poor and offering them grace and love. Martin Luther King Jr. fostered peace through racial reconciliation and teaching people to live in harmony together and practice forgiveness.

Jesus Christ was the ultimate peacemaker. His death on the cross and resurrection brought us back into a right relationship with God and the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to offer others peace. **This is the good news friends: that through Christ’s death on the cross we can help bring other people into this amazing relationship with God through the way we treat them.**

This lifestyle of peace begins right here in the church. Conflict is everywhere, but it is here that we can learn how to model Christ so that we can take these practices back to our families, friends, and communities. If we cannot offer one another peace here in this place, how can we offer it to people who don’t know Christ?

This practice of offering peace is so important that it has withstood the test of time and has made its way into our liturgy. One of the things I am missing in worship is our time to extend God’s grace and pass the peace of Christ to one another. Although we are not able to embody Christ’s peace in this way, God continues to call us to embody our faith through the relationships we have with others.

Being a peacemaker requires action. So, I challenge you this week to offer someone Christ’s peace. It can be as simple as smiling at a stranger or as deep as reaching out to someone with whom you have been in conflict.

Like believing without seeing, peace is something that we all must work at. But with God’s help may we embody our faith and the joy of Easter by choosing the way of Christ’s peace every day. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.