

John 20:19-31  
Presence and Peace  
Sunday April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018

On Palm Sunday little Johnnie was so sick he stayed home from church, but the rest of the family went. When the family got home they were excitedly talking about the palms, the singing, the hosannas and that Jesus came walking into the service leading all the children of the church in a parade. They family said it was quite a show.

Little Johnnie got really quiet and then finally said, “Just my luck. The Sunday I don’t show up Jesus does!”

Today we are talking about “Presence and Peace”, how being present in the Body of Christ grants you the presence of Christ and Peace. In other words our fellowship matters.

Anyway, I want to start by telling you a little bit about my life and search for Fellowship and belonging. The search is why I have a special heart for the stranger in our midst.

When I was a child from the time I was 5 years old until I was 12 my family moved to a new town or home every 9 to 12 months. I can walk you through my elementary grades by the different places we lived in, and some of them were very remote because my dad was a Forest Ranger. The Forest Service is like being in the Air Force. You get moved often.

I and my brothers and sister were always the new strangers and always moved before we ever fit in. By the 6<sup>th</sup> grade I decided not to make any new friends, because we soon would be gone. But in Jr. High I went to a summer church camp and felt an undeniable sense of belonging that began with playing dumb games. Thus began a theme of my later career as a youth pastor of “Fred Games” to give kids a sense of acceptance and belonging.

What I developed from this childhood experience was a great ability to get groups of people to bond or develop a sense of fellowship,

but yet, never myself feeling like I belonged. I had to work at FUMC of Mesa for 10 years before I ever felt like I belonged there, and that was nothing on that church, it was all my own issues. It took me a long time to experience emotionally the Peace of the Presence of Christ as a pastor. But I did, and have grown in the ability to do that to this day.

But this is also why to this day I always search out the stranger in our midst, because I remember what it feels like to feel painfully alone and the power that comes with belonging.

Thomas, “Doubting Thomas” certainly felt like he didn’t belong because he too was absent when Jesus showed up. He missed the forgiveness and peace and mission Jesus presence gave when Jesus showed up in the Upper Room on the day of his resurrection.



Our scripture story opens on the evening of Easter. The disciples are gathered in a locked room out of fear of crucifixion. Suddenly, Jesus stands in the middle of them and says, “Peace be with you.” He repeats this twice to let them know what he is giving is more than the standard Jewish greeting of peace; **it is the peace his presence brings.**



Jesus’ presence confirmed his promise of resurrection. It confirmed his promises of peace, mission, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus’ presence validated all of his previous preaching, teaching, ministry and promises. Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead and truly was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Jesus in his appearance to his disciples granted 4 things.

**First, he gave his disciples peace**, a firm and sure knowledge that when they were tortured and killed as he was, they would be raised from the dead.

**Second, He gave them a mission** saying “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

**Third, Jesus gave them power** when he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

**And fourth, Jesus gave them a message**, “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven and if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

I want to point out, that you personally, have the power to forgive sin in the name of Jesus Christ. Remember the curtain was torn in 2 in the Temple on Jesus’ death eliminating the barrier between God and human beings. There was then no longer any need for the Temple, Priests and Sacrifices for sin, for Jesus was all three of these in one!

What this means is you can look someone in the eye who has confessed to you guilt or sin and say, “**In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven.**” You have that power. It was given to you by Jesus in this passage. We exercise that power every month when we use the ritual for Holy Communion and I say, “In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven!” and you say, “**In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven**”. We do this very formally, but you can even look yourself in the mirror and forgive yourself in the name of Jesus. You have that power!!!

The sad thing in our story today was that there was one man absent, who missed these gifts of **Peace, Power (the Holy Spirit), a Mission and a Message**. Thomas simply was not there. It isn’t recorded why he wasn’t hiding in fear with the rest of the apostles, but he wasn’t there; so he missed out on the gifts, but more importantly he missed out on the Giver—Jesus the Christ.

You and I can imagine his doubt for if we are honest we need to confess we’ve all had the same doubts and unbelief. In Thomas’ case

his unbelief was also probably mixed with anger at himself for not dying with Jesus as he had promised he would.

And he also probable held a lot of anger at Jesus for going and getting himself killed, rather than establishing an earthly kingdom like they expected.

Yes, our words might not have been different than his, **“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”**

A very crude demand for physical proof, a demand for proof that one week later, Jesus was glad to provide.

For Jesus said, **“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop your doubting and believe.”**

Well, Jesus met Thomas’ demand with his very presence and Thomas did not follow through on his request.



Jesus presence was proof enough.

And Jesus gives us all a word of hope and encouragement, **“Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**

We today can be blessed believers if we commit or recommit our lives and hearts to Jesus Christ. The commitment and recommitment of our lives to Jesus Christ is a lifelong process. Usually as children we came to some sort of faith in God through Jesus Christ dependent on our parents. We formalized this belief when many of us were confirmed.

When we are youths and go through confirmation and commit our lives to God, it is exciting, we feel it is what is expected and our

knowledge and love is not very wide, or deep; but it is very sincere and honored by God.

When we are young adults, when we recommit our hearts and lives to Jesus it can be scary, for we see that there truly are great consequences to our actions that can and will change the course of our lives.

As adults when we commit or recommit our lives it is in the midst of the struggles of married life and family, business and career.

We see that our Christian commitment affects more than ourselves and the decisions we make can seriously hurt others, or help them greatly. We discover the true meaning of sacrifice, self-sacrifice when we choose the way of Christ and morality in family life, marriage relationships and business.

As older adults your very presence in the Church serves as a living testimony to the truth of the gospel and the validity of a moral Christian Life. "Walking in the Light" as our 1 John verse says. You show that commitment and recommitment demonstrates that God's way is the right way. The promises of peace, power, mission and message are true.

In the end, a life faithfully lived that has been reconfirmed and recommitted again and again through the valleys of doubt, despair, and depression will have led you to in peace meet God.

The world says, "Life is hard and then you die." The Christian says, "Life is hard and then you're at peace with Christ forevermore." For as 1 John 1b says, "we proclaim the Word of Life."

To reach this sure peace and comfort of the Christian faith, make commitment and recommitment a spiritual discipline throughout your life, especially during and after times of doubt, despair and trial.

Our scripture story today shows us how to hang on until our shattered faith is rebuilt and our lives granted peace by the presence of Christ.

Thomas before Jesus' crucifixion and death had a tremendous faith and belief in Jesus. He was the one who encouraged the other disciples to go up to Jerusalem to die with Jesus. But that faith wasn't as deep and sure as that which he had after the resurrection, after deep doubts and despair.

Thomas missed out early on having his faith deepened and reconfirmed by Jesus on Easter simply because he wasn't there that first night.

Many are the people who complain their faith is so weak and they feel so separated from God, but they like Thomas are not there when the Body of Christ gathers. They miss Jesus. They miss his appearance and his gifts of peace, mission, power and message.

When you are present with other believers your doubts can be addressed and conquered for where 2 or 3 are gathered in Jesus' name he is present. He is alive and present!!!

The spiritual discipline our scripture begs us to follow is **the discipline of Christian fellowship**. I have said many times that **Christianity is as much about belonging as believing**. It is in the relationships of love and accountability within the church that the sense of belonging to God and each other is nurtured and grown.

Today through our Live Streaming we are exploring new ways of relationship and belonging. On Easter during the 3rd service we had 217 people here in the house, but we also had 56 joining us, being present with Christ on line. The challenge we are taking on is how can we help people belong here in relationship when their physical bodies are not here, but they join us in spirit and mind.

To meet Jesus it is important to hang out with other Christians in worship, Sunday school, Bible studies, mission opportunities, UMW,

UMM, Landscaping, dinner for 6, online, and other venues online that are yet to be discovered.

By being present with other Christians you will be present when Jesus Christ is present and your faith will be deepened and reconfirmed as Thomas' was.

I encourage you to make a commitment to a smaller group within the church where you have a sense of belonging, mission and even power because the Holy Spirit is present and moving among you. The purpose of our recent Live Stream luncheon was to gather ideas on how to do this.

Now, if you feel you don't fit someplace or like some group, maybe God has you there to grow, but at times you need to seek a place to belong where you experience the peace and presence of Christ. Try things out and see where you fit.

Don't ever expect perfection anywhere within the church for never kid yourself, we are all sinners, but pick a place and make a commitment to work with those involved to make the best of things. Bloom where you are planted!

I pray my friends that in some way you have experienced God today as we have worshipped and fellowshiped together. If you are confident look for the stranger in our midst and welcome them, help them feel they belong. And if you feel you are a stranger here reach out to another with the faith that God will provide you with a sense of belonging.

In the end, we are all here, because we have accepted the message of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ. As 1 John 1:8 says, **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."** To walk in the door of a church is to confess you are a sinner. It's this common confession of sin and the forgiveness that follows that bonds us together in fellowship.



Have you ever held a sobbing guilt ridden child that has come to you for forgiveness? You don't need to say anything... just hold them. That is the power of our presence with each other.

By being with each other we don't have to look each other in the eye and say, "You are forgiven." But instead we live forgiveness by fellowshipping with one another, and that firm handshake or hug of acceptance says more than any 10,000 words can say. It's the presence and peace of Christ.

Let us pray: Lord today we commit and recommit our lives to you. We commit and recommit our lives to being present with your people whenever we possibly can. In Jesus' name Amen!