

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “Peace Be With You” (John 20:19-31)**

**April 11, 2010**

Last week Paul preached about how Easter, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, means that everything is going to be okay. After the 11:00 service my family and I left to drive to South Carolina to spend a few days with some old friends and hang out at Isle of Palms. We drove two vehicles (if you’ve ever done a road trip with kids you know the golden rule—each kid gets a window seat ☺), and Steph noticed that the break lights on our minivan weren’t working. So we drove home, unloaded the minivan, loaded my pick-up, and began again. It cost us about an hour, and I was, well, feeling less than blessed. Eventually we were all on our way, and everything was fine. About an hour down I-64 our son, Paul, who was riding in backseat of my pick-up, says, “Hey Dad, I guess the Easter sermon came true—everything’s going to be okay ☺.”

One of the aspects of “everything’s going to be okay” is the peace God gives us in Jesus Christ, as we see in today’s reading from John in which Jesus says to his disciples, “Peace be with you.”

On Easter evening the disciples were meeting in a locked room, hiding from those who had crucified their friend, Jesus Christ. Peter and John had seen the empty tomb, and the disciples had heard from Mary Magdalene that she had seen and spoken with the risen Jesus face to face. But the disciples didn’t know what to think. They didn’t know if they believed or not. They were overcome with grief, and yet perhaps there was a sliver of hope that maybe what Mary Magdalene was telling the truth, that maybe Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. It was that Easter evening that Jesus took the initiative, “came and stood among them,” and said, “Peace be with you.”

In the early 70’s Nick Lowe wrote a song called, *(What’s So Funny ‘Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding*, the best known version of which is the 1979 version by Elvis Costello & The Attractions. A few years ago Elvis Costello opened for Bob Dylan here in Charlottesville, and when he played *(What’s So Funny ‘Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding* you could feel him connect with everyone at JPJ as he sang these words:

As I walk through this wicked world  
Searchin for light in the darkness of insanity.  
I ask myself is all hope lost?  
Is there only pain and hatred, and misery?  
And each time I feel like this inside, there's one thing I wanna know  
What's so funny 'bout peace love & understanding?

And as I walk on through troubled times  
My spirit gets so downhearted sometimes  
So where are the strong and who are the trusted?

And where is the harmony? Sweet harmony.  
Cause each time I feel it slippin away, just makes me wanna cry.  
What's so funny 'bout peace love & understanding?

Costello really connected with the thousands at JPJ that night because all of us in the audience long for peace, love, and understanding—and of course all of us who were not in the audience that night also long these things. The good news of the gospel is that God gives us peace in Jesus Christ (He also gives us love and understanding, but that's another sermon for another time ☺). I think the disciples would have totally connected with this song. If Peter, James, and John had iPods, I bet (*What's So Funny 'Bout*) *Peace, Love, and Understanding* would have been on their playlist.

Certainly the disciples, immediately following Jesus' death on the cross, found themselves “searchin for light in the darkness of insanity” and wondering if all hope was lost. Certainly the disciples wondered if at the end of the day there was “only pain and hatred and misery.” Certainly the disciples wondered, “where are the strong and who are the trusted?”

The disciples found out that the trusted one is Jesus Christ, and that he, the strong one was right there with them. On Easter evening Jesus took the initiative, Jesus “came and stood among them,” and Jesus said, “Peace be with you.”

In today's passage from the Gospel According to John Jesus speaks these words not once, not twice, but *three* times to the disciples. Remember that the last time the disciples had seen Jesus was when he was betrayed and arrested. And what had they done? They ran away. When Jesus appeared to the exhausted, bereaved, confused disciples, riddled with guilt, on Easter evening he did not say, “You should be ashamed of yourselves” or “Thanks for being there for me—really appreciate that.” Nor did he say, “I've done all this for you; what have you done for me?” or “Let me tell you ten things you can do to have peace in your life.” Jesus gave his disciples the one thing they needed in that moment more than anything else: reassurance—and he did that by saying, “Peace be with you.” And this greatly encouraged Jesus' disciples, for they “rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”

The concept of peace in Scripture is theologically loaded. Peace, *shalom* in the Old Testament and *eirene* in the New Testament includes not just the absence of conflict and stress, but the presence of God's blessing on every area of your life. *Peace* has to do with your overall well-being, with your salvation. Peace is life under the gracious hand of God. Peace is knowing you are forgiven. Peace is being in right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, as Paul wrote to the Romans: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). We have peace with God only through Jesus Christ, who as Paul states, “is our peace” (Ephesians 2:14). In fact, in Paul's thinking peace is right up there with grace, as Paul proclaims peace to the recipients of every single one of his thirteen New Testament letters.

Peace with God came at a great price, as we see in today's reading from John, because immediately after saying, "Peace be with you" to the disciples, Jesus "showed them his hands and his side." Ultimately, peace with God is based on nothing you do or don't do. Peace with God is based on nothing you have done, tried to do, or plan on doing down the road. Peace with God is based solely on something God has already done for you in Jesus' death on the cross to atone for your sins. Peace with God is only something God can give you, and the good news of the gospel is that he does just that.

The problem is that often we have a hard time receiving peace from God—at least I do. I get stressed out sometimes. I obsess about things I can't control but think I'd really like to be able to. Occasionally I spin worst-case scenarios and imaginary conflicts in my brain. Do you ever do that?

When I was in high school I went out with a girl for a really long time, about six weeks. I was absolutely crazy for this girl. I could hardly focus on my classes at school—for some odd reason I was more fascinated with spending time with her or talking with her for hours on the phone (this was in the pre-texting era ☺) than I was learning about metaphysical poetry in English or redox reactions in chemistry. Three days before the SAT she broke up with me—great timing. I was heartbroken, and combined with the pressure of the SAT found myself really stressed out. Someone at church showed me where Scripture tells us:

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

He told me that if I prayed, God would give me peace even when things on the surface did not change, that's why the peace of God "surpasses all understanding." So that night I prayed for peace, and on the way to take the SAT I prayed for peace, and do you know what? God gave it to me. It didn't help my SAT score that much ☺, but at least I wasn't as stressed about it anymore. And there have been many times since then when I've prayed for peace—when looking for a job, trying to sell a house, standing next to my infant daughter at the NICU, meeting with someone who is angry at the world and taking it out on me, waiting for news after surgery—and each time I must say that God gave me some sense of peace, sometimes just a moment when I knew he was with me and that somehow he was going to work things out. The fact that these moments of peace didn't last longer is a function of my lack of faith, not God's generosity. Perhaps you can relate.

And yet when Jesus says, "Peace be with you" to his disciples, he is talking about a peace that goes way beyond taking the edge off the stress in our lives. Jesus is talking about the peace of God that assures us that we have been forgiven by God, that we have been redeemed by God, that we have been reconciled to God, that we have been saved by the blood the Prince of Peace

shed on the cross, that we have the hope of eternal life. The peace of God means that in spite of boyfriends or girlfriends breaking up with you, in spite of SAT scores, in spite of the financial, physical, economical, psychological, and emotional challenges in your life, you still belong to God, and that absolutely none of those things changes the fact that God loves you right now, at this very moment more than you could possibly imagine.

It is my experience that in the same way that the more you learn the more you realize how little you know, the longer we live as believers, the more we realize our utter dependence on his grace, or as Paul Zahl puts it in his book, *Who Will Deliver Us?:* “Progress in our lives is not principally a matter of new experience or new knowledge. It is rather a fresh returning, in every new round of events, to a very old conviction: Christ died for our sins” (p. 77). And ultimately it is only Jesus who can give us peace from God, the same Jesus who at this moment still bears the scars from his death that made peace with God possible for us.

In October 1871 a wealthy Chicago lawyer named Horatio Spafford was devastated financially during the great Chicago fire as nearly all the real estate he owned was destroyed. Over the next couple years he worked hard to rebuild and in 1873 his friend, the famous evangelist, D. L. Moody, was scheduled to go on a preaching tour in England. Horatio sent his wife, Anna, and their four young daughters ahead of him so he could complete some more business before joining them. During their journey across the Atlantic their ship collided with another ship and 226 people drowned, including all four of Horatio and Anna’s daughters. Annie (11), Maggie (9), Bessie (5), and Tanetta (2) all drowned. Anna sent Horatio a heartbreaking two-word telegram: “Saved alone.” Horatio sailed to England to join his wife. During his journey as his ship passed near where his four daughters had drowned, he wrote the famous hymn, “It is Well With My Soul,” which begins:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Even in the midst of his grief Horatio knew that some day he and Anna would see their little girls again, that one day they would see their smiles, hear their laughter, and hug them again. That’s what the peace of God looks like.

So if today you find yourselves like the disciples on Easter evening—grieved, confused, ridden with guilt—or if you find yourselves simply longing for peace, love, and understanding—be encouraged. God loves you and you have been forgiven. Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, died on the cross was for you, and he has made peace with God possible. Because you are justified by faith, you have peace with God. The peace of God like a river has attended your way, and in spite of the challenges in your life it is well with your soul. Jesus’ word for you today is the same as it was for the disciples on Easter evening: “Peace be with you.”

I'll close with this scripture from Paul's Letter to the Romans that is used at the end of the Morning and Evening Prayer services in *The Book of Common Prayer*:

“May the God of hope fill us with all joy and *peace* in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen” (BCP and 60 and 73).