

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor John O. Swanson

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text —John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

SERMON

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I would like to begin today with a story that I recently read. A long time ago a man began a search for the perfect picture of peace. After a long search, he still could not find one that satisfied him, so he announced a contest to produce this masterpiece. The challenge stirred the imagination of artists everywhere, and paintings arrived from far and wide. Finally the day came when the winning masterpiece would be selected. The judges uncovered one peaceful scene after another, while the viewers clapped and cheered.

The tension grew. Only two pictures remained veiled. As a judge pulled the cover from one, a hush fell over the crowd.

It was a beautiful scene. A mirror-smooth lake reflected lacy, green birches under the soft blush of the evening sky. Along the grassy shore, a flock of sheep grazed undisturbed. The scene was calm and beautiful - it was breathtaking. Surely this was the winner.

Then the final painting was uncovered and the crowd gasped in surprise. Could this be peace?

This scene was decidedly different. A tumultuous waterfall cascaded down a rocky cliff; the crowd could

almost feel its cold, penetrating spray. Stormy-gray clouds threatened to explode with lightning, wind and rain. In the midst of the thundering noises and bitter chill, a spindly tree clung to the rocks at the edge of the falls. One of its branches reached out in front of the torrential waters as if foolishly seeking to experience its full power.

A little bird had built a nest in the elbow of that branch. Content and undisturbed in her stormy surroundings, she rested on her eggs. With her eyes closed and her wings ready to cover her little ones, she manifested peace that transcended all earthly turmoil.

The first word that Jesus spoke to his disciples gathered together after his resurrection was the word, "Peace." How do we experience this peace that Jesus is talking about - where can we find it?

A former president of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences, along with historians from England, Egypt, Germany, and India have come up with some startling information: Since the year 3600 B.C., the world has known only 292 years of peace! During this period there have been 14,351 wars, some large and some small, but all of them collectively have killed some 3.64 billion people. The value of the property destroyed would pay for a golden belt around the world 97.2 miles wide and 33 feet thick. Finally, in excess of 8000 peace treaties were made - and broken in these 5600 odd years.

I guess that goes to show that if we are to find peace (or experience it and understand it), we would be wise to avoid seeking the advice of virtually any current or former world leader. Peace is obviously not something politicians, dictators, kings or generals have figured out.

But to be fair, the peace that Jesus is talking about has less to do with communities, nations or continents and more to do with individuals - at least that is where Jesus understands this peace to begin. Jesus was bestowing upon those disciples nervously gathered together a sense of peace in the midst of a hailstorm of fears that these men were experiencing.

"Peace be with you." How do we find that peace - that inner peace that allows us to empty our hearts and our minds of all the worry, fear, resentment, and pain that this world can bring? How do we find the peace that Christ promises us?

When I think of the painting of the raging waterfall and the bird in her nest gently protecting her eggs, I am reminded that finding peace does not mean the complete elimination stress, anger, resentment and guilt. Rather, it means living with who we are and trusting that we have someone walking with us to give us support and guidance. The little bird found peace - even in the midst of great chaos and danger.

The beautiful picture of the calm lake with the peaceful sheep grazing by its shore, is certainly peaceful. But it does not represent a peace that is realistic to hope for - to strive for - because our lives tend to be a bit messy, they can be complicated and filled with raging waterfalls and dangerous cliffs.

For many of us, the peace that Jesus speaks of will take place only when we come to grips with our past. Many of us are haunted by guilt, resentments, past failures, and lingering hurts. Peace is elusive in the midst of such things.

David Spangler uses a wonderful analogy in his book, *Everyday Miracles*. He tells of living in New Orleans for several years. Situated near the mouth of the mighty Mississippi River, New Orleans was carved out of swamp land.

Just outside the city limits there are several wonderful parks that allow hiking and canoeing through the marsh. One of Spangler's favorite spots is a swamp where there are raised boardwalks that run alongside several bayous for a couple of miles. Among the inhabitants of those bayous is one of nature's most fierce some creatures - alligators.

Spangler learned from someone that alligators like marshmallows. He was told that all he had to do was toss a marshmallow out into the bayou, then sit back and wait. In a matter of minutes, a pair of eyes would surface and silently glide through the water toward the white, bobbing morsel of sugar.

Almost magically, two eyes would become four and four eyes would become six, then eight. He would watch the bushes growing over the water's edge as, invariably, alligators would slink out of the shade and paddle over to the marshmallow. Often without warning, one of the brave reptiles would lunge forward and steal the marshmallow with a quick, powerful snap of its jaws.

What was mysterious to Spangler was the fact that these alligators had silently been watching him all along. No doubt, they and countless others had watched him hike for the mile or so through the swamp and along the bayou. Their piercing eyes and acute sense of smell had sensed the presence of flesh and blood and they had stalked him like any other prey. All the while, he was completely unaware of their hungry vigil. It wasn't until he tossed the marshmallow out into the water that they abandoned their hiding places in the brush that lined the bank and revealed their presence.

"Those alligators," says David Spangler, "are like our memories. Even when we think we are alone and totally free, powerful memories swim just beneath the murky waters of our awareness. Just behind the bushes that grow in the landscapes of our lives are many unsuspected eyes that watch us and, if we allow, control us."

Some of us will never experience peace until we come to grips with the "alligators" in our past. Deep within us reside the memories of every past sin, every past hurt (that has been done to us or that we have done to others), every past resentment we have ever experienced. Once in a while these past sins rise up into our thoughts and trouble us, they frighten us and they throw us off balance. We may not

even consciously know they are there, but still they eat at us and rob us of our joy. Our past can haunt us to the point that peace becomes nearly impossible.

Our concerns for the future can also create obstacles in our effort to experience peace. Worrying can be a crippling thing. I know I have said this before, but it is still true today - my Mother is a great worrier. In fact, if a person could earn a doctorate for worrying, my Mom would have two or three. But I don't believe she is alone. Many of us worry. We worry about what might happen to us, to our children, to our city, country or world that we become paralyzed to do anything about it. And there are certainly plenty of things to worry about. This can be a cruel world. People suffer. Lives spin out of control. Depression, addiction, suicide and violence seem commonplace in our world. Who can help but be concerned about the future? In the face of such a world, peace can seem like a fantasy - a pipe dream.

Yet Jesus says, "Peace be with you," and we can trust that that peace, though elusive, is possible. And it is possible because of the cross. Remember what Jesus did in our Gospel for today immediately after he said to his disciples, "Peace be with you"? He showed them his hands and his side.

Our only hope for peace - for true peace - is connected directly to Jesus Christ and his victory on the cross. He is saying that our past - our sinfulness - has been swallowed up by his death and resurrection and our future is certain, because Jesus walks with us.

What Jesus brings us is a peace that allows us to deal with all that life throws at us. We can trust that our past has been forgotten by God, even though we might still have regrets. We can trust that God has promised to be with us as we make our way in this world - not to protect us from harm - but to guide us through that harm as a shepherd guides his flock to safety.

As a father of two very active and excitable children, I find myself wishing for a bit more peace in my life. I remember my Dad wishing for that same thing when I was young, especially when I would have four or five of my friends over and we were making all sorts of noise. He would wish for peace and quiet and I wouldn't understand what he was talking about. And then when I moved out - I was the last of four children - my Dad was not as excited about the peace that he got. In fact, I remember him saying some 10 years after I moved out that instead of feeling peace, all he felt, at least initially, was emptiness.

But the peace that Jesus brings does not leave us empty. Instead it fills our hearts and moves us to action. It guides us to seek to serve, it directs us outward and moves us to places that we might not think to go. That kind of peace might not have a lot to do with quiet and calm, but it has everything to do with a filled heart and comforted soul.

May that peace fill us today and each day as we walk with our risen Lord and Savior. Amen. © 2010.