

**The Spirit of Easter**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
April 12, 2020-Livestream Easter Service  
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John 20:19-23

So the thing we didn't want to happen has happened. During Lent, self-isolation and sacrifice were a pain, but at least it fit the Spirit of the season. Lent is a season of self-sacrifice. Lent is the season where we give up things. But that's not Easter. Easter is a day of full churches. Easter is a day of thronging worshippers. Easter is a day when Larry pulls out all the stops and shakes the rafters! Easter is a day when little girls put on pastel dresses and the whole family gets together for a special meal. That's Easter. And when this started, we hoped that we would be together for Easter, but now instead of filling these pews, you're sitting at home in front of a TV or a computer. Or worst of all maybe it's your phone. Your Easter celebration trapped in this tiny rectangle. It's sub-optimal.

So, what Bible passage do we go to on this strange day? Where do we turn for a word of hope? How about John 20:19-23. Listen to this story about what happened to the disciples on the evening of Easter day. *"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'*

2020 may be a strange Easter by the standards we're used to, but if you honestly look at the first Easter, our Easter of self-isolation might be more like the original Easter than our usual celebrations! That first Easter was not a day of full churches, loud organs, and little girls in pastel dresses, On the first Easter, the disciples were huddled together inside, their doors locked, afraid to leave their house. Sound familiar?

It's not a virus that put them there; they are locked together for fear of the Jewish leaders. And that fear is understandable. They've just seen what the authorities did to Jesus. They saw their friend tortured and murdered, so they worry that a warrant is out for their arrest, for their crucifixion. As they huddle together it's not just the immediate threat that worried them, *it's the long-term stuff*. What is Jesus' death going to do to rest of their lives? Peter, James and John wonder if their fishing business will survive. They can go back to fishing, but will anyone want to do business with them after their association with a condemned blasphemer? Matthew's worried. He can't go back to tax collecting. But what else can he do? Simon's old friends the Zealots won't give him the time of day anymore since he started hanging around with tax collectors. As they huddle together in that room with the doors locked, their fears are deep, and they are real.

*And that's us too.* As we shelter in place this morning, our worries are deep, and they are real. We're worried that we will get the virus or that someone we love will get it. We worry about people we know in our congregation or our family who have it! And we are worried about what this will do to our businesses, to our jobs, to the state of our society.

On that very first Easter Sunday, what did the risen Jesus have to say to the fearful isolated disciples, and what does He say to us? I will focus on three things that the risen Jesus says to

them, three things He gives to them. First there is peace. John tells us that he and the rest of the disciples were in that locked room because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, *but that's not really the center of their fear*. When you dig just under the surface, there's a different fear, a deeper fear that keeps the disciples huddled together. And that's the fear of death, of course. They're not afraid of the Jewish leaders, they're afraid of what the Jewish leaders can do to them. They're afraid the Jewish leaders will put them to death. Death, that most primal of all human fears. Death, that fear just beneath the surface of so many of our worries. That's definitely the fear underneath our coronavirus fears. That's why we're taking all these measures, that's why we are making all these sacrifices. We don't want to die, and even more to the point, we don't want the people we love to die.

Jesus comes to speak to those fears and he says, "*Peace be with you. Don't be afraid.*" Jesus didn't just say this to them, His word of peace comes with a visual aid. "After He said this, He showed them His hands and His side." He grounds His peace by showing them his terrible, relatively fresh, wounds. *How can these violent scars be visual aids for peace?*

Well, we sometimes show each other our scars. I was thinking about the kinds of things we say when we show each other our scars. Grandpa had open heart surgery 15 years ago. The grandkids hear about it and say, 'Wow! Grandpa they operated on your heart?! They opened you up so that they could see it beating?! "Yeah they did! Do you want to see the scar?" Grandpa lifts up his T-shirt and there's the long red track where the surgeon's scalpel cut him and his ribs were pulled apart. The kids see the scar and they say "Wow!! Grandpa did it hurt?" "Oh yeah, when I woke up from my surgery I cried, I was in so much pain! Every breath hurt! But the operation saved my life. And I'm okay now." We show people our scars to share our painful experience, but even more to the point: we share our scars as a way to reassure each other. I made it through. There's a way through.

You can imagine the disciples leaning in close to Jesus' scars, looking at the tears in Jesus' wrist and the hole in his side. "Wow, Jesus that's incredible. Did it hurt when they did that to you?" "Yeah it hurt. It was awful! Do you remember how I cried out on the cross? But it's okay. I'm alive! So, don't be afraid! Death hurts, but it can't kill you." Jesus shows His scars to them to reassure them.

People will always be afraid of death. Christians included. Death is an awful, awful thing. It's a fearful thing when a doctor tells you that you have three months to live. It's even more terrifying when the doctor tells you that someone you love has three months to live. Death hurts. It makes you cry out. *But Jesus shows his scars so that our fear doesn't rule us.*

Here's a way to think of it: Jesus wants us to fear death as a defeated enemy instead of fearing death as an end.

When people think death is an end, they think that death means complete extinction and never seeing your loved ones again. That's an overwhelming fear. When people think death is a final end, they do desperate things. They start pushing and throwing elbows. They lie, cheat, and steal. They fight you for the life preservers. People who think death is the end might be generous when things are going well, but under stress...stock up on guns, toilet paper and booze and lock the doors.

When Jesus shows us His wounds, He shows us that death is a defeated enemy. The wounds are terrible, but death is not the end because He is alive. Death can't kill you. When you know that death can't kill you, you can face terrible trials, trials that make your heart pound. But in the middle of those trials you can keep loving, keep giving, and keep hoping because you know that death isn't the end, he's just a defeated enemy. Jesus comes to us in our isolation.

“Peace be with you,” He says. And He shows us His scars: “*Jesus does it hurt to die??*” “*Yes. Death hurts. It’s awful. But don’t be afraid! Death can’t kill you. My Father raised me! My Father will raise you! So...Peace be with you.*”

Jesus does more than offer peace verbally; he actually *breathes* peace into His disciples. Did you notice that Jesus says ‘peace be with you’ twice in this passage? He says it twice because Jesus really wants us to have resurrection peace living in our hearts. The first offer of peace comes with the physical evidence of Jesus’ wounds, but when Jesus offers peace the second time, He breathes on His disciples and He says receive the Holy Spirit. I don’t want to make too sharp a distinction here, but it’s almost like the first time He gives visual evidence for the disciple’s minds, but now He is giving evidence to the disciples’ hearts by breathing the Spirit upon them.

Does this breathing remind you of anything? Does Jesus breathing on His fearful disciples here remind you of another Bible passage? Let me ask this question to any children who are listening because the adults in the room are probably struggling. Can you think of another place in the Bible where God breathes on something? That’s right. This reminds us when God made people. In Genesis 2, God took dust from the ground and He breathed on it. His breath turned the dust into a person, Adam. Now Jesus comes to these frightened disciples. They’re scared. They’re hopes have turned to dust. But then He breathes on them. What’s he doing? He’s bringing dust to life again! His breath blows away their fear that is at the center of their heart, replaces that fear with Holy Spirit’s peace, and now the seed of the new creation is growing them.

If you belong to Jesus, He has breathed on you. His breath has blown the fear out of the center of your heart and replaced it with the Spirit’s peace, and now a new creation is growing in you. That doesn’t mean we’re never afraid. I still get afraid sometimes and you probably do too. There are lots of scary things in this world. But fear isn’t the center anymore. Peace is the center. The Spirit’s peace is at the center and someday the fear will be gone, and the peace of the resurrected Jesus will fill us from top to bottom.

How can we live in this peace? How can we get in touch with that deep peace that the Spirit has breathed into us? This week, when I wake up in the morning, before my brain starts to buzz with all the stuff, I have been taking a deep breath. I imagine Jesus breathing His Spirit into me and I hear Him saying “peace be with you.” It’s something that anyone can do, and it reminds you that the peace of the resurrection is at the center of your day and at the center of your heart.

Finally, one more thing that this passage says to frightened people holed up in their homes. When Jesus breathes on the disciples, *He doesn’t just give them peace, He gives them a mission.* “I am sending you,” He says. He sends them out, He sends us out with the mission of peace and reconciliation. It’s a mission to declare the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection to the world. “Christ is alive! He is going to change you. He is going to change everything.”

That mission is for all of us, but your staff at LaGrave feel that call intensely. That’s why it’s hard not to have a big Easter service with everyone here. We want to tell you all loud and in person: “Christ is risen! Death is beaten! Alleluia! Don’t be afraid!” We want that message augmented by choirs and multiple trumpets. We want this church to shake with the sound of our praise. But I think we are all learning that we don’t always have to shout our resurrection hope. *Because we can’t meet together, the work of the church has taken quieter forms.* We’ve made phone calls to members to see how they’re doing, to ask if they have any needs. We’ve met via zoom and told each other how good it is to see each other’s faces. I know a member who buys

packs of 48 stamps and sends out 4 or 5 cards every night to people God puts on her heart-just trying to breathe a little peace in their direction. We've made videos, written notes. We've used an old-fashioned device called the telephone to call each other. More than a few times this week, I've heard people say how much of a blessing this all is. More than a few times, I've heard how all this touches and strengthens people. More than a few times, I've heard people trying to hold back tears as they express gratitude for the importance of the church family.

It's made us realize that all these calls and cards and contacts are alleluias. These alleluias may not be shouted or accompanied by organs, but in their own way they proclaim the resurrection. In their own way they make the risen Christ real present to each other and they send us forth in His strength. The virus cannot stop the mission of the resurrected Jesus! The virus cannot stop the wind of the Spirit from blowing! Dear people, wherever you are sitting right now, Christ is among you. He walked right through your front door this morning! He's right there in the room with you! And He says, "Peace be with you. I'm alive. And you belong to me."

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