

April 24, 2022 Easter 2C
The Choice of Peace
John 20:19-31

Last week was so great here at St. Matthew—the whole week! Worship was so good and so powerful. Right now, I am torn between 2 things. Part of me wants to do it again and part of me wants...some peace and quiet.

We all yearn for peace and quiet, at least some of the time. We live in a noisy, intrusive world to the point when moments of silence may feel terrifying. Even when we are relaxing, there's a good chance that the telephone will ring – a sales pitch for something we don't need – or the doorbell ring, or the computer ping or the cell phone buzz. Even if we decide to get away from everything, getting there can be stressful.

When we hear that Jesus appeared to his disciples after the Resurrection and said, "Peace be with you," it sounds like a wonderful invitation. Look at what's going on in the lives of the disciples. They are in the upper room, huddled for fear. Fear denotes an absence of peace. The disciples feared their new title, that of Apostle, feared their Mission to go out into the world and tell about Jesus, and feared the outside world that seemed ready to pounce and destroy them as it seemed to have done to Jesus. And Jesus comes and says, "Peace!."

At one level, Jesus saying, "Peace," was utterly normal. Just as we say, "Hi," or "Hey," depending on our tribe, or "How are you?" – greetings that have become so habitual they are blurted out before we think. In Israel, then and now, the habitual greeting was "*Shalom*," peace. It was expected. The response, "Peace be with you also," was the polite reply.

Shalom was a greeting and a blessing. It means not only peace, but wholeness, health and contentment. When you greeted someone with Shalom, you were speaking a blessing to them that their lives would be whole, content, healthy, peaceful.

Jesus says hello to his fearful, bemused friends, as he says hello to us, just as we share the Peace at church each Sunday. Too often at the sharing of

the peace, we use that greeting to engage in hurried conversations that have nothing to do with peace at all! "Wanna join us for lunch after church?" "Have you seen what Marty is wearing?" "I hope the sermon is not too long." Prior to COVID we would stretch this time out. We try to shake as many hands as possible, hope no one is offended if their hands aren't shaken, and worry that this noisy interlude won't destroy the rhythm of the liturgy.

There is some deep theology behind this tradition in the church. It goes back to the first or second century. It was meant to signify that God had made peace with us and we could share that peace with each other.

So when we do this in worship, it would be a good idea to remember this scene behind locked doors and remember what Jesus was saying to the disciples in the upper room.

What was he saying?

Jesus was saying that his presence *is* peace; a peace, as St Paul puts it, that is beyond our understanding, far more potent than an absence of noise, or a feeling of well-being. Jesus says, "Peace," and we are reminded how costly his gift of peace is, and how extraordinary its depth. Because Jesus has died, has risen, has ascended, we are offered a share in the results of those costly actions. Baptism reminds us that we have died with Jesus, have risen with him, have ascended with him, and now live in his company, in the company of the Church, fed by Word and Sacrament.

Secondly, the peace Jesus gives us means that nothing can separate us from the love of God, except our own unwillingness to accept the gift, live in the gift and share the gift. This means peace is both a gift and a choice.

Accepting a gift is a moment of self-emptying, of acceptance and gratitude. For a moment we are beholden, vulnerable, dependent as we receive that which we lack. Receiving a gift can strike our pride, can be uncomfortable.

Living in the gift demands an active gratitude. It also means that we value that which we have been given. We feel it necessary to show it off.

And that leads to sharing the gift. The gift of "the peace of God which passeth all understanding" is to be received as a trust to share with others. Thus when we exchange "the Peace" today, we say to those we greet, "Here is the most wonderful gift, the gift of accepting Jesus into our lives and sharing that communion with each other and out into the world."

All the orders Jesus gave to the apostles are about that Peace: Go tell about me; go baptize; do this in remembrance; love one another.

In short, hearing and accepting Jesus' "hello" forms us and renews us. It is that peace for which we yearn and which we are given. The apostles went into a hostile world. Many of them were martyred. But through it all they were upheld and sustained by the "Peace" Jesus gave them. Today he offers that same Peace to you.