

**The Peace Christ Gives Us**  
St. Thomas Sunday (Jn 20:19-31)

In today's Gospel, for St. Thomas Sunday, we hear our Lord three times pronounce the familiar blessing: "Peace be to you" (Jn 20:19,21,26). The text begins with the disciples fearfully hiding in a locked room on the very night of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. They had spent three years of their life forsaking everything to follow him (Mt 19:27), only to see him crucified. The one in whom they had placed their hopes, whom they believed to be the Christ, the Messiah, who would set the injustices of this world right, himself had succumbed to the world's injustices. They were understandably disoriented, dejected, and apprehensive. Their inner turmoil manifested itself in the outward behavior of hiding, closing themselves off from threats, whether perceived or imagined. Jesus doesn't wait for them to feel better, to heal themselves, but, like a good shepherd in search of his lost sheep, he enters into their fearful seclusion and immediately comforts them: "Peace be to you." Like the disciples, our anxieties and fears lead us into the seclusion of busyness, withdrawal from relationships, and distractions. We build walls around ourselves that prevent others from entering our lives. And yet it is no less true that the good shepherd enters our hiding places and announces to us: "Peace be to you." He doesn't ask us to heal our own inner turbulence, but comes to offer us the inner peace that the world cannot give.

The disciples respond to Jesus' comforting presence and words of inner stillness by rejoicing (Jn 20:20). Their spirits were unsurprisingly lifted, but Jesus' response to their joy is surprising; he repeats: "Peace be to you" (Jn 20:21). We often think of ourselves as needing inner peace when we feel negative emotions: anger, fear, worry, temptation, and anxiety. We are less accustomed to think we need inner peace when we are in a positive state: happy, elated, and rejoicing. But excitement and enthusiasm can be just as distracting to our spiritual lives as anxieties and fears, so Jesus responds to the disciples newfound cheerful disposition with the reminder to be at peace. Like many others, I have long benefited from the morning prayer that begins "O Lord, grant that I may greet all that this coming day brings to me with spiritual tranquility." For years I subconsciously interpreted this to apply to the unexpected trials and difficulties of the coming day. It was a tremendous gift when God allowed me to see that I need spiritual tranquility even more during the positive, fulfilling, successful, and upbeat events of the day. In many ways, these are so much more dangerous to our spiritual life, allowing us to more easily forget about God, rely on ourselves, and set us up for a greater fall in the future. The devil loves to have us on an emotional rollercoaster. Our Lord grants us inner stillness in the good times as well as the bad.

The peace that Jesus wants to have permeate the lives of his disciples is characteristic of the Kingdom. St. Paul tells us that "The Kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). When Jesus sent out his disciples to preach the Kingdom of God

he instructed them to enter homes and “first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on it; if not, it will return to you” (Lk 10:5-6). To be citizens in Christ’s Kingdom, subjects of the King, is to be characterized by a peace that is not of this world, and which this world cannot provide. The peace of this world is dependent on momentary circumstances; it depends on the events outside us. The peace of the Kingdom is an inner stillness which external events cannot not disturb, for it has its source in Christ alone.

The reason these words, “Peace be to you,” are familiar to us is, of course, because they are so prevalent in our services, especially the Divine Liturgy. Repeatedly the priest turns toward the faithful to offer them Christ’s blessing of peace. It is not accidental that these blessings are given surrounding the New Testament readings, when Christ is proclaimed to us through his word, and in anticipation of receiving him in Holy Communion. It is also not accidental that the opening words of the Divine Liturgy are “Blessed is the Kingdom ...,” and then immediately we pray, “In peace let us pray to the Lord” and “For the peace from above ...” The Divine Liturgy is our entrance into the Kingdom, the place where inner peace reigns, the place where his peace is offered to us in his word and in his body and blood. It is where we experience ‘the peace from above’ and not simply the transient peace of this world. If we are to be children of the Kingdom, we must be recipients of the abiding inner peace offered us in the Divine Liturgy.

The final expression of peace in the Divine Liturgy is “Let us go forth in peace.” We are invited to take the peace that we have received in the Liturgy into our homes, into the homes of others, into our neighborhoods and places of work, into the world that is so desperately crying out for Kingdom-peace. At the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy we are sent out even as Jesus sent out his disciples--to preach the Kingdom and to offer its peace to our unbridled world. We are not able to give what we don’t have. It will do us no good to go forth preaching peace if we ourselves haven’t experienced it. But insofar as we have allowed ourselves to enter into the Kingdom manifested in the Divine Liturgy, to experience the Kingdom which God has placed within us, then we will have something to offer to others. We can go forth with a divine stillness, which cannot be shaken, to a world longing for something so authentic and immovable.

The world we inhabit in the 21st century is well depicted by St. Thomas in today’s Gospel. He wasn’t with his fellow disciples on Pascha night when Christ first appeared to them. Instead he hears of Christ’s resurrection by their testimony. What is his response to this good news? “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, *I will not believe*” (Jn 20:25; emphasis added). We often call him ‘doubting’ Thomas, and he certainly had his doubts. But the his words, “I will not believe,” express not only doubt but also defiance. Sometimes we hide in secluded rooms; sometimes we hide immersed in busyness and distractions; sometimes we hide behind confident-sounding, definitive words. I remember hearing a popular campus speaker summarize his experience of

articulating and defending Christianity to academics: “The bigger the mouth the bigger the void.” We might recognize this attitude not only in others but in ourselves. We easily hide behind emphatic and defensive, confident-sounding words. How does Christ respond to this form of hiding? When he enters through the closed doors again, as he had eight days earlier but now with Thomas present, his first words remain the same: “Peace be to you” (Jn 20:26). The good shepherd in search of his lost sheep even penetrates through our self-assured confidence and our insulating rhetoric to offer us a peace that melts our insecure defiance.

St. Thomas believes because he has seen the risen Lord, but Jesus tells us blessed are those who believe even though they have not seen (Jn 20:29). St. John uses this theme of ‘believing without seeing’ to introduce a summary of his entire Gospel: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (Jn 20:30-31). Life that Christ gives, life in his name, life in the Kingdom, is offered to all those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; we enter into his life by trusting and relying on him--not on ourselves or on the ‘saviors’ our world offers. His is not an earthly, mortal, life--contingent on the vicissitudes of daily events. It is, rather, a life fully infused with the unwavering righteousness, peace and joy of the King. It does not take us out of this world, but leaves us as salt and light in it. It does not disengage us from temporal events, but allows us to experience the eternal presence in the present moment. We are delivered from fleeing to the imaginary past or future in our thoughts, where no peace can be found, and are rooted in the here and now, where he continuously speaks to us: Peace be to you.

Christ is Risen. Indeed He is Risen.