

## ARTICLE: Peace be with You

“Google, what’s the weather forecast this weekend?” “Hey, Siri, call Mum.” “Alexa, set my alarm for 7:00 a.m.”

The human voice now has new power! We no longer need to type with our thumbs. We can speak to our devices, and they will do what we ask. Or at least, that’s how it’s meant to work. It’s the sort of thing that was science fiction just a few years ago. We can dictate to our word-processing programs, browse the internet without touching the keyboard, and call up a recipe in the kitchen without getting our tablet screen dirty.

God created the voice to carry power. When sea lions gather in large colonies to raise their pups, hundreds of pups swim out into the water together and return as a group. On the shore, they find their mothers by listening for the unique sound of her voice. Over time, every young sea lion finds its way back to its own mother.

Easter is, among other things, about the power of the voice, because the risen Lord Jesus comes to speak His peace into our hearts so that we may speak that peace to the world.

This is what we read in this morning’s Gospel from John. After Mary and the other women told Jesus’ disciples they had seen the Lord, the disciples didn’t really believe. By the evening of the day, the disciples are behind locked doors, like a little hutch of rabbits afraid of the wolf that might be looking for them. This is the Church at its very worst. Hunkered down, huddled together, letting fear rather than faith control their every thought and action.

Then suddenly, Jesus arrives and stands among them. John says the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. But in their joy, not one of them apologises for their behaviour over the last few days. No one says they’re sorry or that they should have done better. Perhaps part of the reason is they don’t get a chance to say anything. Instead, it’s Jesus who speaks the first word. And just as was the case at the sound of God’s voice in creation, the sound of Jesus’ voice creates something wonderful and new: “Peace be with you,” He says (John 20:19). This is not a wish or a hope. It is His gift to them.

“Peace be with you,” He says, and there is peace and joy.

This, the disciples could only start to understand, was the entire purpose of what Jesus had just experienced. His death on the cross was meant to restore the peace between God and humanity that had been broken when we first sinned. Sin always creates separation and conflict between two parties. In sin, we focus on ourselves rather than others. In sin, harmony is impossible, as our will is not willingly aligned with the other’s. Sin prevents us from being with God because His holiness cannot coexist with unholiness. But by taking our sin to the cross, Christ removed the barrier and reconciled us to God, restoring our peace with Him.

The entire scene repeats a week later when Thomas is finally with the disciples. The doors are still locked, but Jesus returns again. He speaks the same words. “Peace be with you.” Instead of scolding, Jesus encourages Thomas to touch and see the wounds. “Do not disbelieve, but believe” (v 27).

Even though two thousand years have passed since that first Easter evening, the church still struggles to step out from behind locked doors and into the world. While we might not fear suffering the same cruelty as Jesus endured on the cross—the fear that kept the first apostles locked away—there is just as much to be cautious of in the twenty-first century as there was in the first. I sometimes hear people express concern that our church is aging and in decline. There is worry that, as we look around, society appears to be falling apart at its seams with the ongoing decline of morality. We even

sometimes start to doubt planning for our future as a church because the rising cost of living will make it impossible to keep the church financially afloat, and so on.

The temptation is to focus all our attention on our fear and let that fear paralyze us. This text from John 20 is not about how the world locks its doors to the Gospel, but how the Church locks itself away from the world. The irony of the disciples' locked doors is that they weren't really keeping out soldiers looking to crucify them and they weren't keeping out friends and relatives who may have wanted to ridicule them for following Jesus; there is no record of either of those things happening. The One they were locking out was Jesus. They locked out the word He had so clearly spoken to them about dying and rising again, and in locking out that word, they locked out Jesus.

When fear becomes our focus, we fall into the same trap; we lock out the Lord, who time and again tells His Church, "Do not be afraid!" Jesus will have none of it! The securely locked doors are no problem for Him. If the grave could not keep Him in the ground, their padlocks would not keep Him outside the room where they were gathered. And so, He comes and stands among them and among us and speaks His Word—a word that brings the very thing it says: "Peace be with you!"

This is Jesus' word for us. "Peace be with you." "Peace, your sin is forgiven!" "Do not fear the world. I have overcome the world. Peace be with you." That word comes to us today, with exactly the same power as it came to those first disciples on the first Easter and to Thomas a week later. "These [words] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (v 31). In His Word, Jesus comes to us, and we experience the power of His voice. He doesn't just tell us about peace, but He actually speaks peace to you and me. As Luther puts it, "As soon as He said it, it was done" (Luther's Works 12:32).

Jesus spoke His peace to us in the water of our Baptism, where we were joined to His death and resurrection and died to sin and rose to new life. That peace is spoken to us every time we return in repentance to our Baptism, and He says to through our pastor, "I forgive you all your sins." That peace is spoken to us at His table, where in, with, and under bread and wine, He comes through space and time to feed us His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins and to lift from us from our fears. There His voice speaks peace. "This is for you," He says, "for the forgiveness of sin." And we rise from the table at peace, ready to go into the world. "As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you" (v 21). The Lord cannot be bound; His Word will not be bound; and His followers do not live behind locked doors. He sends us out into the world, but we do not go emptyhanded. He breathes His Holy Spirit upon His disciples, and to His Church, He hands the keys to the kingdom of heaven. "If you forgive the sins of anyone they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld" (v 23). And with that, we, like those first disciples, are sent to the world to be the voice of peace. Our voices, our human voices, become voices of power, not because they are louder, wiser, or more entertaining than other voices, but because through our voice, He Himself speaks.

Long before there was a Siri, Alexa, or Google, there was the risen Lord Jesus, speaking to and through people like you and me, so that all who are locked behind doors of fear, sin, sickness, and even death itself might hear His word: "Peace be with you."