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The Second Sunday of Easter

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The Risen Christ Calls Us to Proclaim His Resurrection

Disciples who hid and shivered with fear on Easter evening soon boldly proclaimed the message of Jesus wherever they went. What changed their fear to courage? Jesus appeared to them alive! They came to understand that the resurrection of Christ compelled them to carry the story of a living Savior to everyone. We may not have seen Jesus with our physical eyes, but we see him through the eyes of faith. The sight of the living Lord Jesus moves us to speak of what we know and believe.

First Reading **Acts 18:1-11**
The Lord encourages Paul to proclaim the good news.

Second Reading **1 John 1:1-4**
John was ready to proclaim what he had seen and heard.

Gospel **John 20:19-31**
Jesus removed the disciples fears and commissioned to preach the gospel.

Sermon **John 20:19-23**

Our Witness Begins with Easter Peace

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."

Introduction – If you had been Jesus on that first Easter morning—obviously, you weren't, but just play along for a minute—if you had been Jesus on that first Easter morning and you had just come back to life before dawn and you were planning your day, where would you want to go and who would you want to see first? Maybe the Roman guards, the ones Pilate sent to protect your tomb? Or maybe Pontius Pilate himself, the one who signed your death warrant. How about King Herod? The Romans dragged you to his palace early Friday morning. If I had been Jesus, I would have loved to show up in the high priest's bedroom early Sunday morning and tapped him on the shoulder: "I'm back!" Winners like to glory but they also like to gloat. There's a little of that in all of us. When we're right we like to crow, "I told you so."

Jesus took one victory lap on Easter morning. He descended into hell and proclaimed his victory to Satan and all the damned. And then he came back here and proclaimed his victory to the saved: To Mary Magdalene outside the tomb, to the women racing back from the tomb, to two disciples on the way to Emmaus, then to his disciples in the upper room—

and that was all on one day. A week later he appeared to Thomas. St. Paul mentions that Jesus appeared to **five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time**. Jesus appeared up in Galilee and he appeared down in Judea, but he appeared only to his friends, never to his enemies.

Can you imagine how different things would have been in our world if Jesus had appeared to his enemies on Easter Day? The soldiers would have told their centurion, Pilate would have told his emperor, the high priest would have told the Sanhedrin. Nobody would have doubted the resurrection; everybody would have believed that Jesus was alive. The whole planet would be filled with Christians celebrating Easter. But that wasn't the plan, was it. Jesus didn't gather a group of followers just to teach them. He called people to follow him so he could train them. One of the first things Jesus said to his fishermen followers was **From now on you will fish for people**. And the last thing Jesus said to his followers was **you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth**.

It's Easter Sunday evening in the Gospel for today. We are going to listen to Jesus this morning and we're going to remember—and it is essential that we remember this—that on the very day Jesus rose from the dead and defeated sin, Satan, and death, within hours of his triumphant appearance in hell, our Lord Jesus Christ had the ministry of the gospel on his mind. He greeted his followers with peace and then he authorized them to proclaim peace. What we need to remember is this:

Our Witness Begins with Easter Peace
Peace for the witnesses...Peace for the world.

1. What did the disciples know and when did they know it? The rumors started flying early. Mary Magdalene found Peter and John and reported that grave robbers had discovered the tomb and stolen the body. The news spread like wildfire and most of the disciples met together at a safe house. All at once some of the women burst in with the incredible news that they had seen Jesus and that he had talked to them. Well, the disciples didn't believe a word of it; the women's words seemed like nonsense. By and by Peter arrived from his run to the tomb. It was true, Peter said; he had seen the Lord, and he was alive. They had to believe Peter; Jesus must have come back to life in some form. But even when the two disciples came back from Emmaus with the news that Jesus appeared to them on the road and spoke with them for a long time and ate supper with them—even then they were still struggling. They couldn't wrap their brains around the idea that exactly the same Jesus who died on Friday—that same Jesus--was alive. Jesus may be alive, but they weren't ready to unlock the doors just yet.

And then Jesus showed up. No breaking down a door, no crawling through a window. Just there. **Peace be with you**. He didn't say "I'm alive but I'm different now." He showed them his hands and his side and he said, **Peace be with you**. He didn't say, "The game's over." He said **Peace be with you**. He didn't say "We have to pack up and get out of town." He said **Peace be with you**. He didn't say "Where were you when I needed you?" He said **Peace be with you**.

When Jesus rose from the grave on Easter Day, his first thoughts were for his witnesses. When he identified himself to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, he said, **Go to my brothers**. When he met the women on the road, he said, **Go and tell my brothers**. Before they could witness for him in the world, he needed to take away their tears, their confusion, and their doubt. And so that's what he did.

And so that's what he does. **Jesus brings the peace of Easter to those who are his witnesses**. That's us. When I was a little boy, my dad would open my bedroom door on Easter morning and start singing "Awake My Heart with Gladness." I told him I hated it, but I really loved it. I sang it to my boys and I think of it every Easter. What do you remember best: the smell of the lilies, the sound of the alleluias? Whatever you remember of your childhood Easters, that was Jesus imparting his peace to one of his witnesses. We weep and we get confused and we doubt as the disciples did, sometimes over personal tragedies but more often because of personal sins. We've all said, "I should have done more" and we will all say it again. We've all been afraid of attacks from others, and we've all locked ourselves behind closed doors. We've all wondered about the Bible's teachings and we've all worried why our witness doesn't always seem to find more success. But again and again Jesus comes to us: **Peace be with you**. Jesus comes to us Easter after Easter and

says to us: **Peace be with you.** Of course, Jesus is speaking to the world, but he is especially speaking to you and you are his witnesses. **Our witness begins with Easter peace as Jesus imparts peace to his witnesses.**

2. Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Well, that didn't take long. Jesus' work wasn't over, but the venue was changing. Jesus was heading for the right hand of the Father, but his followers were staying right where they were. They knew this was coming; he had told them. But this is the moment. It was time for the formal transfer of authority. From this moment on Jesus wouldn't proclaim the gospel publicly again. Now listen; this is pretty important stuff. This is about you and what you do in your life. At that moment in that room on that night Jesus' followers took on the proclaiming voice of Christ in the world: **He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."** There are no marching orders here. No directions, no powers, no gifts. But in that breath of Jesus and in that gift of the Spirit there was an anointing and there was an appointing; there was a career and there was a commission: This is why you exist, Jesus said. From this point on, Jesus said, **If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."**

Thomas wasn't there on that first Easter night, but others were, and so we believe that Jesus' commission to proclaim the gospel doesn't belong only to his apostles. We understand that all believers possess the right to proclaim the gospel or withhold the gospel. We are all members of the royal priesthood and we all have been called **to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.** Where will that witness take place? At a bunk bed with your grandchild or a hospital bed with your grandparent? At a coffee shop or a kitchen table? What will you say? Will you invite a wandering child? Will you encourage an uncertain spouse? Will you comfort a guilt-ridden parent? Will you warn an arrogant friend? Can your witness work in different ways? Can you give generously to support other witnesses? Can you assist students preparing for full-time witnessing? Jesus will lead you where he wants you to go, and then he will give what he wants you to say.

On that Easter night long ago, Jesus breathed in his followers and he breathed in you the gift of his Spirit and he set you apart to proclaim his peace to the world. Not a peace of your own imagination, not a peace between nations or cultures, but a peace that transcends all understanding, a peace that exists because Jesus obeyed and died and rose again. The peace you proclaim is the peace Jesus gives. **Our witness begins with Easter peace because Jesus makes his peace our message to the world.**

Easter is personal, even today, even here. When Jesus says **Peace be with you,** you hear it with your own ears and believe in your own heart. Easter peace is for your life and your livelihood, for your marriage and your family, for your living and your dying. But Easter peace is also for your family and relatives and acquaintances and neighbors. For all who carry the weight of guilt, for all who sense the strength of sin, for all who endure the threat of temptation, and for all who feel the touch of death your witness is always the same: **Peace be with you.** That's right: Easter peace. Amen.