

## “The Peace Of God That Passes All Understanding”

- I. **Introduction: Peace be with you, Jesus said. The peace, Paul said, that passes all understanding.** We know this morning that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and we know that the resurrection is an essential culmination of the Easter story. Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance in today’s gospel is but one of six such appearances in Luke. But that first group of apostles did not initially comprehend that Jesus would die as he did and return to them as their resurrected Lord. Consequently, after his death they were afraid, and upon his return they were confused – initially. The discoveries the apostles were about to make about Jesus, about peace, and about the future were earth-shaking, and it all began with Jesus coming through the locked door and saying “Peace be with you.”

On my friend David’s recent journey with terminal cancer, he discovered a book *Comfort Ye: Finding Light in Times of Darkness* (Schmidt 2007). He was especially drawn to a chapter by Bishop Desmond Tutu entitled, “Why Does God Not Stop It?” He and I used a portion of this chapter in a healing service during my last visit with him. The chapter ends with a quote from Romans 8, vs. 38-39. Let me share it with you: *Neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities . . . nor heights nor depths, nor anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.* Bishop Tutu writes: Our God is right there with us in all our anguish and grief and bewilderment. He loves us with a love that will not let us go, a love that is unchanging and unchangeable. We are each precious to him. Our names are engraved on God’s hands. He knows each of us by name, for the very hairs of our head are numbered. And he wants to wipe the tears away from our eyes . . . God loves you with a love that will not let you go. [Listen my brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the incredibly Good News of Easter – God loves you with a love that will not let you go.] Tutu continues: . . . you are precious to God with a preciousness that cannot be computed . . . God will never desert you. (Tutu 2007:67)

As my friend David took this in, he began to increasingly understand what it means to experience the peace of God that passes all understanding. And David needed that

peace. At the same time that David knew he had only several months at most to live, he and his wife Catherine had been informed that their one son, who had a promising professional career, a young daughter, and a bright future in every way, had also been diagnosed with terminal cancer. At first it was perplexing for my friend David to know how to deal with his own death and the death of his son at the same time. *Then he began to tap into the Easter understanding that the peace of God can and does, when we claim it, pass all understanding, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, not David's cancer, not his grief, nothing could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus.* Then David was able to use the time he had to grieve his son's death with his wife, his daughter, and his son's family, and be fully present with his wife as she grieved the loss of both of them. Peace be with you, the peace that passes all understanding.

II. This morning, I want to focus our attention on the three elements of the resurrection experience that are presented to us in our gospel reading from Luke. These unfold in sequence. First, as Christians we are instructed to turn away from fear and despair. Second, as we become more free from fear we are invited to learn from the resurrected Jesus and open up our hearts, our minds, and our wills to be reborn; and third, we are directed to witness to others what we have seen, experienced about Christ, and learned to be true about our faith.

A. *First the fear.* There is a great deal of floating fear in the air at this time. A recent national survey indicated that 47% of all Americans are acutely anxious about their personal well-being. The pollsters found that many of us are worried about whether our sources of security are being pulled right out from under us – our pensions, our jobs, and our lifestyles. I don't want to sound as if I am minimizing the magnitude of the challenges we are facing. There have been many events that have undermined our carefully laid plans for the future.

Yet, at the same time, what I hope we can see this morning is that Christ brought new wisdom to those hiding behind locked doors of fear: *Our peace is not based upon our security.* Our peace is derived instead from the presence of the resurrected Christ in our lives. The peace that Christ brought to his disciples in today's Gospel is the peace that caused Christianity to literally explode with new life in the Book of Acts. In fact Luke, who authored the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts is preparing us for the birth of the church in today's readings. Our gospel reading is a foreshadowing of what is to come next in the Christian story. The first generation of Christians relied upon their belief in the resurrected Christ for their security. Their material possessions, their social status, even their

physical lives were not the source of their peace. *Their peace, the peace that passes all understanding, came from their faith, not their security.*

- B. *Second, what can we learn from the resurrected Jesus?*** It says in the Gospel that after showing the disciples the wounds on his hands and feet, he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. He also had a meal with them to show them that he had a resurrected physical body. There is much to learn from Christ once our fears are set aside. During our recent time away in South Carolina, Peg and I watched the movie “Fireproof.” It’s about a marriage headed for a break-up and the way in which the presence of Christ opened up the possibility of resurrecting a this marriage relationship. I won’t go into the details of the story so as not to spoil the movie for you, but I do want you to consider how our faith can re-order and renew our relationships, including the way we view what we are entitled to have and what it means to love one another.
- C. *Third, becoming a witness to what we have seen, experienced, and learned to be true about our faith.*** This is one of the exciting cutting edges here at Ascension – God has been present in the lives of many of us. God has brought a number of us through rough, tough times. I have seen God at work among us, bringing some of us back from the despair of illness, loss, loneliness, and unfulfilled dreams. Many, if not all of us, are sitting right next to someone or sharing a pew with someone who has struggled in some way, has turned to God for help, and has experienced God’s response. God has answered our prayers about our children, our marriages, our physical health, and our fears and worries that come in so many different forms. *Over and over again, God has heard us, God has answered us, and God has protected us. The specifics of our stories may differ, but the crux of our stories is the same – the love of God has triumphed over the power of the cross in our lives. That is why we can have the peace that passes all understanding -- because there is no limit to the love of Jesus Christ. And Christ has instructed his disciples – and that would be us -- to become witnesses to what we have seen, experienced with Christ, and learned to be true about our faith.*

Here is the good news of the Resurrection that Christ wants us to share -- *nothing, no nothing, can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ.* Alleluia, alleluia. Amen.