

## **Shalom! Peace Be with You...**

SERMON TEXT: John 20:19-31

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*In the name of Jesus Christ, our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord, who is not dead but alive, who is not in the tomb, but is here with us now, with His love and His power, as He lives and reigns at the glorious right hand of God, our Heavenly Father. Dearly beloved, let us pray...*

*O Heavenly Father we come before you in the name of Your Son— the Prince of Peace— and sealed by Your Holy Spirit, to hear your Word, Your proclamation of peace to us this day. O Lord, open my mouth to speak Your Word, and open our ears and prepare our hearts to hear Your voice and Your voice alone. Amen.*

“Peace be with you.” These are the words with which Jesus, the Risen Lord, greeted His disciples one week after the tomb in which His body was laid was discovered to be empty. With this greeting He appeared in the midst of men whose peace was in pieces as, behind closed doors, they cowered in fear for their lives, fretting their future. “Peace be with you.” Like the peal of a bell, on that second Sunday, the tone of Jesus’ greeting reverberated in their company, fixing their attention to His presence among them. Peace. Peace. The word rang as a single note with multiple overtones: it served as both a simple greeting and as a blessing. Among the Jews of Jesus’ day, such a salutation carried with it the religious overtones of hope in God’s promise of restoration and reconciliation. It was a way of expressing that the hope of the ‘world to come’ would come to the world and make it whole.

The word which our Lord would have used to greet His disciples was the Hebrew word ‘Shalom’. Shalom. Peace. Shalom. It’s a word which carries with it much more than the idea of an inner peace of the heart. It’s also not just a call for a cease fire between all the warring

factions found in this world, whether among family or friends or neighbours. No, when used as a greeting, it is much more than wishing someone well and that their life would be free from conflict. No. This Hebrew word imparts much more than even all of that— it speaks of a quality of life which both includes and yet transcends such ideas of inner and outer peace. It points to God’s promise of a new creation flowering after the Fall that occurred in the ancient garden. It points to a multi-coloured form of fruitful living in the richest of blessings. It speaks of the budding of a restored relationship with God, of a broken world made whole again.

Shalom.

This ancient greeting is still in use today among Jews; however, among the majority of those who still use it, it seems to no longer carry with it the same kind of weightiness it once did. Its secular use seems to have swallowed-up the sacred sense of the word. So, now, among modern Jews, it serves as a simple “Hello” or “Goodbye” (and since the same word is used for both it’s makes you wonder how anyone can know whether they’re coming or going). Sadly, its use, even in this sense, as a simple greeting, even in Israel, is on the decline. Back in 1961, there was a song in the Broadway musical *Milk and Honey* whose lyrics were: “Shalom, Shalom, you’ll find Shalom the nicest greeting you know; it means bonjour, salud, and skoal, and twice as much as hello. It means a million lovely things, like peace be yours, welcome home. And even when you say goodbye, you say goodbye with Shalom.” Well, a little more than half a century later, some Jews are starting to lament the fact that in our modern world this word is falling into disuse. After all, while there has always been a need for peace in its fullest sense ever since shortly after the very beginning of the world, the urgent need for peace in that part of the world, even in a limited sense, is a pointed reality. In ancient Israel, it was Roman

sword or spear that threatened their sense of peace; in modern Israel, it is the constant threat of bombs and bullets. The fear that is very real today is the same fear that was very real back in Jesus' day.

Behind locked doors, Jesus' disciples were dreading their fate as they trembled "for fear of the Jews," in fear of the Jewish leadership. They were afraid that the same fate that befell their Master would soon fall upon them. They witnessed their Master's arrest in the garden. At the foot of the cross one of them witnessed Him strung up onto a wooden cross, His hands and feet pierced by Roman nails. From a distance, it is possible and probable, that the other disciples, after having scattered earlier, later saw the body of their Master hoisted onto the cross, on that hill just outside of Jerusalem's walls. One week later, on the first day of the week, they were gathered together trying to make sense of everything while huddling in fear. Suddenly, Jesus appeared in their midst and greeted them with the words, "Peace be with you." Shalom aleichem. Peace be with you.

Given the chaos which ensued both during and after Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples couldn't tell whether they were coming or going. They were no longer at peace. They had no idea what the future held. They were afraid. It's interesting to note how Jesus appeared among them. It's as if He was already there, just unseen. Revealing Himself to them, He proclaimed His peace to them, His shalom. He showed them His nail-scarred hands and they began to understand the peace which He gave, a peace unlike that which the world can offer. They didn't know what their future held, but they began to grasp with their understanding exactly in Whose hands their futures rested. Shalom. He showed them His side. Seeing this, all the pieces surrounding His proclamation of "peace" began to fall into place. He shed His blood to bring

them true peace. He was pierced for their transgressions, bruised for their sins, and by His stripes they were made whole. Shalom. Our Risen Lord showed them in His scars that He loved them to the uttermost. He loves us also in the same manner—and this we believe even though we have not seen nor touched those scars. Easter is the evidence of God’s love for us. It tells us that peace, shalom, came at a cost, that it was purchased for us on the cross. The disciples that were there that day were gladdened when they were greeted with Jesus’ proclamation of peace. His shalom stilled their hearts, bringing calm in the midst of chaos.

At first, His disciples were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” Why did they doubt that He was bodily there before their very eyes? Do you find it odd that they—and especially St. Thomas—allowed such doubt to exist in the first place? After all, they were with Jesus throughout His ministry. They saw Jesus perform many miraculous signs (so many, in fact, that St. John tells us he couldn’t record them all for want of space). They saw people raised from the dead over the course of their time in the Master’s presence. Most notably, they were there when Lazarus was called out of the tomb after being dead for four days. So why would they doubt—especially since Jesus had already spoken to them about the things that would come to pass in accord with the ancient testimony of the Scriptures? Well, why did their ancient ancestors doubt God even after witnessing their deliverance out of Egypt by miraculous plagues, pillars of cloud and fire, walls of water, and so forth? Why do we too fret with fear when, like the disciples, we perceive our world to be falling to pieces with no hope of peace?

I've been there myself. I know you've also been there and if you haven't yet, well, I can assure you that you will. When I think of Jesus' bodily resurrection and appearance to His disciples, I can't help but think of Lazarus. Again, why doubt that Jesus was raised from the dead given the fact and living testimony of Lazarus? When I think of Lazarus, I can't help but harken back to a time when my own world was in utter chaos. It was at a time when I had begun serving as the Director of Christian Outreach at the Church of St. Mark- Lutheran, which is just a hop, skip, and a jump away from this place. I had just entered into that role and taken on the responsibility of a totally new ministry within that church. I had no formal training or experience. I only had a zeal for outreach and a prayer. So I ventured into uncharted waters only to find myself quickly pulled into the deep by the undertow. While trying to keep my head above the waters, successive waves of tragedy struck my heart. I witnessed the death of an unborn child, its promise lost. Within a couple of months my mother was taken under by cancer. Then yet another death. Still, I did not drown in sorrow nor was I swallowed up in a sea of fears over the future. No. What sustained me was the shortest verse in the Scriptures. So when I think of the chaos that can encroach us or, rather, will certainly surround us throughout our days in this world, I return to the story of Lazarus because it brings me to Jesus. You know, the disciples had access to the same. They were there! At Lazarus' tomb, Jesus wept. He knew that Lazarus would be raised, and yet He wept. That's the shortest verse: "Jesus wept." That's the verse that brought me peace. Jesus was not indifferent to the turmoil that troubled Mary, Martha, and those who mourned Lazarus' death. Nor was Jesus powerless. After all, it is He who raised Lazarus from the dead. The enemies of sin, death, and the Devil would not have the last word. No, Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, has the last word. His

word to us today is the word He spoke to His disciples back then: “Peace be with you.”

Shalom. This peace is not freedom from troubles in this world. Rather, this peace transcends this world because it is the peace with God which prepares us for the world to come. Troubles are transient. They come. They go. Another one follows and so on, and so on. The disciples—and especially St. Thomas—needed to see and touch Jesus to understand what true peace, the peace which can defeat doubt, was really all about.

Jesus did not deny His disciples what they needed at that moment in which He appeared before them. He appeared before them bodily, showed them His scars, and ate with them. Jesus, who was believed to be cursed by God for being hung on a tree, now blessed them by His presence. The Risen Christ stood as proof of God’s promise of peace. This is what gave them the proper perspective. God, in Christ, brings a peace that brings order to the world’s confusion on the matter even as the evidence for the resurrection brings confusion to the world’s order. It is only when that peace with God which was brought about by Christ’s death and resurrection begins to take precedence in our hearts that our hearts can then find peace in the chaos that still surrounds us. This peace transforms us as new creations in Christ Jesus.

When Jesus appeared to His disciples, He not only greeted them in peace, bringing before their eyes love’s evidence. He also came to them with love’s commission. He bestowed them with the Living Spirit of God so that they could go forth with His message of peace—the good news of the forgiveness of sins—to all the peoples of all the nations. Carried along in the power of the Spirit, they were entrusted with His message of peace, shalom. His Gospel brings His peace. Much more than a state of mind, it is a power put forth by its proclamation.

Brothers and sisters, the peace that is with us is that which restores our relationship with the God who will never abandon us in this world and who will wipe away every tear in the world to come. Easter is all about this eternal peace. Those without Christ can only wish for peace in futility saying “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” Conflict, chaos, death, and dread dominate as long as one’s definition of peace differs from that offered by our Lord. As Christians we have the peace that comes from Christ’s cross alone. This peace will carry us as we carry our crosses. Easter’s message of life, of a new creation, of forgiveness, of being made whole as children of God, ought to resonate throughout our days as our witness to the world. It is like a bell which tolls aloud for all to hear. The Easter message may have many overtones but its particular note is that of true peace. May it ring clearly in all we say and do. Shalom aleichem. Peace be with you. In Jesus’ name: AMEN.

*Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, ever keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Amen.*