

“Hope At Easter”

11 April 2021 - Led by Rt. Rev. Dr. David Bruce

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 435 Christ the Lord is Risen Today

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: John 20:19-23

Praise: I Will Sing The Wondrous Story

Sermon:

It is difficult for us to place ourselves in that room, but nonetheless I want to invite you to try. A number of the disciples were there - Judas had gone, of course, and Thomas for some reason we don't know wasn't there, but the others were. For three years, they had invested their lives in the belief that Jesus was the Messiah of God. They had been listening to His teaching and witnessing the miracle He had performed, and that had been enough to convince them that they were right, that He was indeed the One. But now they're hiding behind locked and barred doors in fear that what happened so publicly to Jesus might, in fact, happen to them. And as if that wasn't enough, they are processing a completely bizarre encounter with Mary Magdalene, who has told them that she has seen the Lord, that she mistook Him for the gardener but that He's alive. The apostle John writing this gospel doesn't tell us what they thought about this, but we can assume they found it difficult to credit.

Several lifetimes, as it were, have been crammed into the previous week for each of them. There was the moment of triumph as they arrived - "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" - and then they witnessed this. And then there was the moment of tension in the temple, perhaps a foretaste of some of the trouble to come, when Jesus appeared to call the religious leaders of the day a bunch of crooks and thieves. Then they celebrated the Passover festival, finishing with the Paschal meal in an upstairs room. Judas hurried out after that strange remark about betrayal which Jesus made at the table. And then they went out to the streets of the city thronging with people in the place for the festival, all the excited chatter; and then down into the valley outside the walls of the city towards the Garden of Gethsemane. There was more talk there of betrayal. Peter heard Jesus say that the disciples would fall away and like sheep would be scattered. He then said with great confidence, "Oh, you know even if all fall away on account of you, I never will. I never will." Jesus assured him that very night, before the cock could crow, he would deny Him three times, which indeed he did.

Betrayal for Jesus came quick enough with a squad of soldiers led by the traitor himself. And then there was the horror of the trial and the humiliation and death of Jesus, which would forever remain etched upon the minds of the disciples, as witnesses to the events watching from a distance, and of course, iconically, is etched on the history of the world. The dream was over and the proof was a broken and dead body lying in a tomb, matching the mood of their broken hearts and fearful spirits. It was dreadful. Psychologically, the disciples were

simply crushed, because they had nothing to do. They were literally like sheep without a shepherd. The only thing that they could think of was to gather together and hide in fear.

So, I have a question: what was it which transformed them from *this* to the world-changing phenomenon they became, a movement that would do more to shape the world and its civilizations than any other in history, indisputably so? The answer is that Mary Magdalene's unlikely story about the gardener was true! Jesus came - risen, bodily - from death to stand among them. And He said, as He came to that locked room and stood with them, three things which they really needed to hear; and I believe He says them to us today as well, as with perhaps similar fears some uncertainties we stand at the threshold of new things in our nation and our world, things we've never experienced before.

I. "Peace be with you."

The first thing He says is in verse 19 of John's gospel, that passage we read: "*Peace be with you.*" Now this was, of course, a typical enough greeting for the times, but it has a much deeper significance here, I think. The Greek word is *eirene*; the Hebrew word is *shalom*. It's a greeting which says, "May you experience everything that God wants for you." That was the thrust, the essence, of this greeting in a Hebrew setting. This is the peace or the harmony which comes from being in tune with, or at one with, our Creator.

There's been a great deal of talk, rightly so, of the cost to our mental health of the pandemic. It has introduced a kind of discord, a sort of anti-peace, into the world and has robbed us of what it means to be at ease. If a person cannot be at ease with themselves, then something is wrong. We were created to be at ease, to be at peace, to be recipients of this gift of *shalom*. If we aren't, then our very humanity has been assaulted in some way. Jesus offers to restore our humanity to us, to make us to be as we were always intended to be, which is to be at ease, at peace with our Father. No nervousness about it, no dis-ease, no fear, but only the deep-seated anticipation of running into His arms when, as it were, His key turns in the door and He returns.

We are not living in such a moment of cultural peace. We are living in a time of cultural turmoil. The world appears to be at odds with itself; perhaps it always has been. So, this gift of peace which Christ offers is a precious thing, a precious gift and, indeed, it will resonate with an uneasy people in a conflicted time. The question that rises from the lips in such moments is, "How can I be at peace?" Well, Christ comes into the heart of that confusion and says, "*Peace be with you.*"

II. "I am sending you."

The second thing which Jesus says to these confused disciples in this moment of fear is, "*I am sending you.*" It's in verse 21. This commission to the Church to go, to go into the world, is framed in slightly different ways by Mark and Matthew. Mark puts it this way; he says, "*Go into all the world and preach the gospel,*" recording those words of Jesus expressed in that moment. Matthew, recalling a similar moment and similar teaching but with a different emphasis, puts it this way; he says, "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

Now, these sayings of Jesus are amongst the closing words of wisdom that He had to give to His disciples. They, as it were, set the Church up for its agenda of work. And in the privacy of this locked room, Jesus pours fresh content into this and says something more specific. He tells us not only *that* we are to go, but *how* we are to go; verse 21 says, *“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”* I'd like you to pause for a moment and consider what this might have meant to those nervous and traumatised followers of Jesus, who a matter of days before have seen Him tortured and executed, now standing before them. It was all the evidence that they needed to see what this meant, because He showed them the fatal wounds on His hands and His side. Jesus left the splendour of heaven to enter our world. He came to us out of sheer and unadulterated, undiluted love, and we killed Him. The wounds are there to see. We did that. *Now*, says this same Jesus, *in the same way I was sent, I'm sending you.* So for some of those in the room that day, these fearful folks who were wondering what the future would hold, this would mean their deaths.

I have an old friend in Russia who, in the course of a three-hour drive through the night in an old, rusty van in the depths of a Siberian winter, told me what it meant for him to follow Jesus. He had been imprisoned during the Brezhnev years in the *gulags*, because he was a Christian, and he suffered terribly there for almost two decades. By rights, he really should have died, but life had too firm a grip on him. When he was released following the collapse of Communism in the late 1980s, the testimony of his life spoke only of grace. I have to tell you that there was not a scintilla of bitterness in him, only the privilege of suffering for Jesus, who first suffered for him. So, we need the peace of God to equip us to go the way that Jesus came. If you're not right with God to start with, you simply won't make it on such a journey.

III. “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Then the third thing that Jesus said is in verse 22. Again speaking in the same way to these disciples, He said, *“Receive the Holy Spirit.”* I think He's really saying, *If you take these words to your lips, don't think for a moment that you are to escape the ravages of a comfortable world's rage at you for daring to speak this gospel. Don't think for a second that you will be immune to the trolls and the bullies. And do not consider it likely that you will escape the attention of those who say that the whole thing is simply a nonsense and a fraud, that talk of sin and the need for forgiveness is really the symptom of a sick mind. The testimonies of the existence of God as a supernatural being is merely indicative of your delusion.*

You'll get it all, you'll be railed at by a world which simply will not have you and your gospel talk. Now that being so, you have a choice. You can stay silent and hide, hide away in fear and out of concern, or you can speak and speak out, and do so in scorn of the consequence. I'm humbled to be a member of a church which believes the gospel, but I know sometimes fearfully what this will mean for her. I know that she will need strength for the task which cannot come from herself. She needs the Holy Spirit and He is given to us as a gift, as if we might inhale the very breath of Jesus and carry His life within us, whether to the *gulags* or to the suburban life of your place and mine.

Look at this astonishing thing these words of the risen Jesus produce, and with this I'm going to close; it's in verse 23. Jesus says to them, *“If you forgive anyone his sins, they're forgiven.*

If you do not forgive them, they're not forgiven." Now, you read a verse like that at first sight, and it might appear that Jesus was given the disciples a kind of authority which belongs to God alone. It seems odd at first; indeed, it's true some branches of the Christian Church have understood it this way and have taken the role of the clergy to be the dispensers of grace through the sacraments, so that the sins of the people may be forgiven by this means. I think I prefer to see the role of the Church not so much as the dispenser of grace, but as the presence of grace. We may proclaim, and do so with persuasiveness and power and passion, such that people are drawn to Jesus, see His death and His resurrection as the only means of hope for them. Within each of us who knows Christ personally is, therefore, the power to affect the eternal destiny of our neighbours and friends. Again, we have a choice. We can stay silent in fear, locked away and concerned, or we can speak. We can speak grace, we can dispense it, we can demonstrate its presence.

But you look at your town or your village and you say, *Oh, how could I possibly do that? How could any words that I say make an impact on that? I really don't have the faith for my town.* That may be so, but let me encourage you to look at your road or your street. Do you have faith for your road or your street? Picture it in your mind. Picture the houses that are next to you; there will be two of them, one on either side probably. Could you have faith for them? Now, think of the people who live in those houses. You already know their names. Would you have faith for a conversation with them? It doesn't have to be about Jesus, at least not at first. Just the weather will do for now; that's where it begins. Because then you begin to pray for them, and it might seem odd at first to do it, but you'll soon get used to it. The next time you meet and the next time you have a conversation, God will have found a way of turning the conversation around to something more than just the weather. And before you know it, you're sharing your life and your Lord with them. That's how it works. It's not complicated.

Easter is a time of hopeful celebration when we remember that Christ is alive, that Christ is present with us and that Christ is the Author of all hope for this year and for the years to come. May this be so in your experience and mine in this season. Amen.

Praise: Yet Not I, But Through Christ In Me

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: In Christ Alone

Benediction