



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

Peace Be With You

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: John 20:19-23 (ESV)

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Dear friends,

Someone recently wrote: "As depression was to the 1990s, so it seems we have entered a new age of anxiety." In the dictionary, anxiety is defined as being mentally troubled, worried and concerned, uneasy and nervous. There appears to be a lot of that going around these days, especially with this pandemic. People are anxious, fearful about getting that coronavirus. Many people have lost jobs because of the pandemic's effect on the economy, and they are struggling to get by. Families have been living on top of each other 24/7 for the past year, and that can be quite stressful and hard on relationships. Parents tend to worry about the kids anyway, but now they're even more troubled as they watch their children struggling with online learning and being separated from their classmates. You watch the news on television, and by the time it's over, you can't help but feel a bit more anxious about the state of the world, right? It seems to be spinning out of control. A friend of mine told me that he stopped watching the news

because it gets him too stirred up and he can't sleep at night. So yes, that writer could be correct in her assessment of our times: we do live with a lot of anxiety in our lives these days, and that's not good.

We see anxiety and fear at work among the disciples of Jesus in our story for today. It's evening, the disciples are huddled in the upper room, they've had a very traumatic few days. They watched their master crucified and now they had heard that Jesus was alive, but they weren't sure what to believe about that. They've bolted the door because they are very afraid: afraid of the Jewish religious authorities who were behind the killing of their master and who now might be after them to arrest them and silence this Jesus movement once and for all. There might have been some other kind of anxiety at work in them as well. Perhaps there was anxiety about the future. "What are we supposed to do now?", they might have wondered. "What's going to happen to us? We walked away from family, gave up our businesses for Jesus." Or perhaps there was even a bit of fear of Jesus Himself. As I said earlier, they didn't know what to make of this news that the women had brought from the tomb. It all seemed surreal, mysterious, even a bit frightening. And besides that, they had let Jesus down big time and they could have been thinking, "If He really is alive, is He mad at us? I wouldn't blame Him. We were so unfaithful to Him."

So anxiety and fear were in the air as they nervously listened for approaching footsteps or a sudden knock on the locked door. Suddenly, Jesus appears and stands among them, and guess what, the first words out of His mouth are: "Peace be with you." This is more than a mere everyday greeting that Jesus is giving them. This is more like an announcement. It's good news. "I'm here, I'm alive. Be at peace." He shows them His wounds, doesn't He, to confirm his resurrection, that the person they saw crucified stands before them now alive and well. And the fear of the disciples was replaced with gladness, just as Jesus said back in John 16: "So also, you will have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice. And they rejoiced." This is a real turning point for those disciples. Never again will we read of them being fearful and unbelieving. You just take a look in the Book of Acts and see if you can find that. Like the song says, "Because He lives, all fear is gone." That was their theme.

Then He repeats it again, as if to emphasize this peace for them. "Peace be with you." But this time he attaches a commission to it. He says, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." This, first of all, must have given them the peace of knowing they

were forgiven. No more wondering, “Does Jesus want to have anything to do with me after all this failure on my part? Does He want to use me since I've been not a good disciple to Him?” And these words of commission are offering reassurance and forgiveness to them, saying, “Yes, you are forgiven.” And Jesus was also answering that question about the future for them. They would now be called apostles, meaning “the sent ones” who would go with the authority of God to tell everyone else the good news of Jesus Christ and salvation.

Those words, “As a father sent me, so I'm sending you,” reflect a principle that the one who is sent is the same as the authority who sent Him. And he or she speaks with the same authority, like an emissary who speaks with the authority of a king who sent her. God has been present in the work of Jesus, and Jesus will be present in the work of His disciples. How? Well, the next verse answers that: “When He had said this, He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Sending those disciples into the world alone would be futile. So Jesus prepares them. He breathes new life into them – the life of the Holy Spirit, who would empower and renew them to do this work as He dwelled within them. He's the spirit of the living Christ, they would never be alone or on their own again. And that gives peace to them. They've been afraid and confused, hidden in a locked room to escape danger. Now He's given them reassurance and strength to stand up, unlock the door, go outside and begin their proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins. And those disciples went in peace. And they served the Lord, just as they were called to do. It was not easy. It was filled with hostility towards them as they did their ministry. But that peace of the Holy Spirit was in them and kept doing His continuing work in them, keeping them going in spite of the conflicts that they faced. They had Christ's Peace. As someone has wisely said, “Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of God, no matter what the conflict.” How true.

So this Easter story has some important implications for us today as we live in an age of anxiety. You see, Jesus still stands among us today as the risen Christ: He is risen, He is risen indeed! And His words to us are the same in the midst of our anxieties: “Peace be with you.” That's what Jesus wants to give you, you know: peace, His peace. His resurrection confirms for us that He really is the long-prophesied Prince of Peace that Isaiah said would come. He has come to breathe His peace into your life and mine. That same peace we read about in this story is available to you and me today. First of all, the peace He wants to give us is peace with God – a reconciled relationship with God that

was broken by our sin. That's why Jesus entered our world: because of a broken relationship. Remember, now, as He spoke these words to His disciples, He had just been to Calvary, where He had made peace by the blood of the cross. Now He seemed to be saying to them, "It's been done, it's paid for, it's finished. You have nothing to fear. I have made peace with God for all those who believe in me." True peace with God, you see, comes only – and I mean only – through Christ's accepted work of death and resurrection that He did for us. Of course, this is the need of all humankind: to have peace with God. That's what the gospel is about: having peace with God. We who were enemies of God because of our sin can now have peace with Him; a restored, reconciled, mended relationship. As the apostle Paul has written in Romans, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is a peace we cannot manufacture ourselves. Only God can bring about reconciliation between Himself and humankind. This is a peace that had to be made for us, that we can enter into and enjoy as we believe the truth of the good news. Jesus, having put away our sins at the cross, has given us peace with God. And trusting in Christ, I'm forgiven. God lovingly welcomes me home to live with Him forever and ever. Amen to that. That's real peace – no longer anxious about where I stand with my God and what my eternal destiny is. I know where I'm going.

Do you have that kind of peace with God? You can, you know. It's simply a matter of asking Jesus into your life as your savior and Lord. It's kind of like a beggar holding out an empty hand to receive a gift that a king wants to give him – the gift of eternal life. And then you'll have the grace and peace of God, the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ in your life; you can live with the peace and security of knowing that whether you live or whether you die, you are the Lord's forever.

Jesus, our Prince of Peace also not only offers us peace with God, but He gives us the peace of God that passes all understanding. Earlier on, Jesus said He would give His disciples that confident peace of God that would carry them through tribulation as He prepared them to face a world that would be hostile towards them and the message of the gospel. He candidly said to them, "In this world, you will have tribulation. Count on it." But He also said, "In me, you will have peace." And they did. Just read the Book of Acts and you'll see confident peace of the Risen Christ at work in them as they brought the gospel of peace to the ancient world. They were secure in the promises of Jesus, of peace with God. You can still see that kind of peace at work today in the lives of Christ's workers, I subscribe to Voice of the Martyrs magazine, and I'm always

moved by the personal stories of persecution for the gospel that people in other parts of the world are going through. As you read their stories, there's often a reference to the strength and peace of God that is present in their lives as they serve the cause of the gospel in hostile territories. And perhaps you've experienced that kind of peace in your own life as you stood up for Jesus and spoke His gospel to others. I know I have.

By the way, that peace of God is there in every circumstance that we face. Earlier, Jesus had also told His disciples, before His crucifixion, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, I give to you." Jesus knew we would need a rock solid, authentic peace, which the world cannot possibly give you and me. The world can only give you a kind of peace that is weak and fleeting and conditional and fickle. And there almost certainly will be continued difficulties and hardships you have to face in life: conflicts you have to endure, brokenness you have to navigate and live with. For now, the world remains broken. That's why we have it, this brokenness and difficulty. Life can be difficult. The Prince of Peace never promised perfection in this life. But what He does promise is a deep, personal, spiritual peace, even in the hard times of life: the peace of knowing that God is with us, that we're loved and He'll never leave us. His peace is the kind of peace that steadies us in life's storms. That gives us perspective, that sustains us when the world seems out of control or when circumstances in your life take a turn for the worse. Christians down through the ages have experienced this kind of peace in hard times. They testified to it and have celebrated it in their own lives. Maybe you have, too. They've sung about it in hymns like "When peace, like a river." You know the words: "When peace, like a river, attendeth my way; When sorrows, like sea billows, roll. Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul."

Oh, yes, and did I mention to you that the peace our Prince of Peace offers us is perpetual, eternal? It's always available and never runs out. It starts now in this life and will be consummated one day when He returns with trumpet sound in the halls of Heaven with Him to finish what He's begun and to usher us into a never-ending era of peace and joy and life with one another and with God forever and ever. What a great and glorious day that will be. But until that day comes, may the peace of the Risen Christ rule in your hearts and minds each and every day as you go on your way with him.

Amen.