

## Peace Be With You

### Luke 24:36-48

<sup>36</sup> While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” <sup>37</sup> They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. <sup>38</sup> He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? <sup>39</sup> Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” <sup>40</sup> And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. <sup>41</sup> While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate in their presence.

<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you— that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things.<sup>1</sup>

In many churches there is a tradition called passing of the peace. Members of the congregation share words of peace with each other. I have discovered the longer I live and the more challenges I have in life, the more I need the peace of Christ. The disciples huddle together behind locked doors, afraid that the authorities will come after them. They struggle to take in these strange reports of “Jesus sightings” and wonder what it all means. Then suddenly, Jesus is there in their midst.

Jesus begins with the gift of peace to his followers. “Peace” is a greeting, an offering characteristic of Jesus’ ministry. He has come to bring peace (1:79; 2:14; 7:50) and has sent followers out to greet others with peace in his name (10:5–6). This greeting is not simply typical, but has added weight here, given the extreme fear of the group.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Lk 24:36–48). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

The group is bewildered by uncertainty about just what Jesus has become. He is able suddenly to be in their midst, as well as quickly to be in quite different areas around Jerusalem. They know Jesus had died, yet also that he has left his tomb, guarded only by two gleaming messengers. The only category available to them for imagining Jesus anew is “ghost” or “spirit.” Such a figure, a ghost or spirit from beyond the grave, was a real cause for fear.

Jesus calls upon the group to use their senses to identify him as not a ghost. Fear of those returned from death is endemic in ancient cultures. We might look at 1 Samuel 28:8–15a as an example. King Saul used a medium to communicate with the Judge and Prophet Samuel, to determine whether he would be victorious over the Philistine army the following day. So, the disciples were familiar with ghost stories. Note the threefold progression of emotions. Those gathered in the room are already on edge. When Jesus appears in their midst, they are “startled and terrified.” They think they are “seeing a ghost” (v. 37). Earlier the women have talked about the empty tomb, relaying the news that Jesus has arisen, and the two from Emmaus have told of Jesus being revealed to them as they broke bread. Still, the followers are not prepared when Jesus suddenly materializes.

Fear is the natural human response. It would be our response. Jesus responds to their fear in two ways. His first words are, “Peace be with you” (v. 36). Jesus both understands and challenges their fears. “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” (v. 38) Jesus meets the disciples where they are. Then by inviting the disciples to touch and see, and by eating some fish, he encourages them to move beyond where they are. For in Jesus, death is transcended.

But Jesus took pains to make the disciples understand that he was not a ghost or spirit by allowing them to touch him and then eating in their presence. **SARAH**

**S. HENRICH**

Fear turns to joy, but they are still disbelieving and still wondering. Again, we can relate. Our hearts would thrill to see Jesus alive, but it is too much for our feeble minds to reason through to a logical conclusion. Yes, we are glad, but how can this be so? Jesus moves them to the next level. He uses familiar words of Scripture to remind them of the prophecy. Jesus opens their minds to begin to see that death is not the final word. Set free from those bonds, they are commissioned to become witnesses.

In “opening their minds,” Jesus set them free from their fears. Today we need such transformation. It is only after Jesus mitigates the fears and confusion of his followers, including those who have seen him just a bit earlier, that he opens their minds by engaging in Scripture study with them. He opens their minds (v. 45) to understand. Minds cannot be opened when trapped by fear. We learn from the story of Cleopas and companion, whose eyes were closed and mood downcast in an earlier episode (vv. 16–17). Only after the breaking of bread were their eyes opened (v. 31). When Jesus’ followers have been reassured and begin to reimagine life after death, they are able to understand Scripture anew. Scripture as a whole, as Jesus reveals it to them, is prophetic of the death and resurrection of God’s messiah. The suffering and death of God’s messiah is predicted by Jesus beforehand (9:22) but goes even further back to prophetic words in God’s Scripture. Jesus lives in accord with Scripture, and both the words and the man Jesus truly reveal God’s plan of God’s blessing, forgiveness of sin, to all nations,

such has always been God's intention. Scripture has been fulfilled; they have seen it. Now they understand (v. 45) as well.

Today, this text addresses our issues. We cannot escape our fears. We may ask behind what locked doors each one of us is hiding. Our fear may be very personal, such as the fear of hearing that dreaded word "cancer," or some other health challenge. Other fears are unemployment, loneliness, or loss. We fear for our children and grandchildren. We fear for our daughters and granddaughter, especially concerned they will not be victims of violence or abuse. Often our fears get played out on a national level. We fear that the economy will not support us during this pandemic. We fear terrorist attacks. Underlying our fears is the one that we cannot seem to talk about easily—the fear of death, our own or that of someone we love. Our fears hold us captive. It becomes difficult to give witness to the great joy that is ours—that the bonds of death could not hold Jesus. Jesus is alive.

The power of the resurrection is the power to plant the seeds of transformation. The hope of the resurrection is grounded in the experience of those first followers. Closed minds can be opened. The potential is for a release in a prophetic way. The word of God calls us to peace rather than security.

This becomes problematic in a day and age when we seem so concerned about personal and national security. Yet could the attempts to keep us secure with guns and armies actually be working against the peace that the world needs? Yes, hiding behind "locked doors" may help us feel more secure, and our loaded guns may make us feel safe, but we are still left with our fears and mistrust. Our passage from Luke asks the question of us today, "How are we to be released from those fears in order to be a proper witness?"

Dorothee Soelle, born in Germany in 1929, grew up during the years of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Her writings are theological reflections on coming to grips with the horrors of the concentration camps and life after World War II, realizing that her heritage of Protestant liberalism had failed to stop the war. She challenges the human propensity for wanting to feel safe, to feel secure from any threat, by seeking that from God. In her essay "Peace, Not Security," in *Essential Writings*, she notes that "change happens at the level of action that contains risk." Later, in the essay "Jesus' Death," Soelle goes on to write that "because you are strong [in Christ], you can put the neurotic need for security behind you. You do not need to defend your life like a lunatic. For the love of the poor, Jesus says, you can give your life away and spread it around."

Jesus suddenly appeared in the midst of his early followers. He brought peace and change to their lives as they moved from fright and alarm to joy mixed with disbelief and puzzlement to open and understanding minds and hearts. That marked shift in the core of their beings led them forth to take great risks, witnessing to the risen Christ. Jesus did not bring them security. Rather, they risked all in following his call. For they had come to understand that Jesus had conquered the ultimate threat, death itself, and their fears were groundless. Jesus' words "Peace be with you!" came to fruition in their hearts.

The challenge us as to twenty-first-century Christians is great. Are we able to let go of our fear and desire to be secure, whatever that may look like? Consider the signs of hope. A televised news report told of two women who were 9/11 widows. Grateful for the outpouring of support they received, they started thinking about the women in Afghanistan who, when widowed, lose status in that society and therefore find their already difficult lives even harder. They raised

money and formed a foundation called Beyond the 11th to support Afghani widows, and even made visits to Afghanistan to meet the widows they were helping. For them, these connections have helped to make sense of the world. Reclaiming the ancient practice of hospitality for the stranger may lead us to our true home where all can be at peace. They model for us the gift of open and understanding minds and hearts. **NANCY R. BLAKELY**<sup>2</sup>

Today we live in a world of war, poverty, disease, neglect, prejudice, fear, isolation, inhumanity, exploitation, discrimination, hopelessness and sinfulness. Jesus continues to say: “Peace be with you”...and calls us to be witnesses that Jesus brings peace, wellbeing, comfort, assurance, hope, compassion, and love.

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<sup>2</sup> Henrich, S. S. (2008). Perspective on Luke 24:36b–48. In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B* (Vol. 2, pp. 424–429). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.