

Sermon – April 19, 2020
“Peace be with you.”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text – John 20:19-31

Good morning and welcome to another live stream for the Northumberland Charge from Afton United Methodist Church. I hope that you have been able to take advantage of the opportunities over the last few weeks to engage in an online group. I will encourage you to do so as we continue to be limited to meeting primarily in an online format. Let me encourage you to join in our service this morning as fully as you can. Stand for the readings, stand and sing the hymns, pray the prayer, say the responses, and worship God as best you can wherever you are on this Sabbath day. I ask that if you are watching on Facebook, please let us know that you are present by typing a greeting into the comment line. The Charge is also sending out copies of the sermon each week by email and by snail mail to those who do not have internet. If you are aware of someone who would like a copy of the sermon and bulletin each week, please let the church office know and we will include them in our mailings. You can also find both the print version and the audio recording of the sermons on both of the churches' websites if you don't want to listen through Facebook. And please continue to send us your prayer requests via email, text, Facebook, or phone calls. We will collect those requests, pray over them throughout the week and incorporate them into our prayers during worship.

I do want to say a word of thanks to the musicians who have come to share their talents with us this morning and for those who are supporting the service through their technical and other help. Thank you, each and every one, for your support and the sharing of your gifts.

It is still Eastertide, the season of Easter, and that means that I get to greet you with a call and response. Instead of saying your response to my call, please type your response into the comment line. Are you ready? Christ is Risen! Type in your response. He is Risen indeed!

In scripture time, we are still in the first day of Easter, Resurrection Sunday. This morning we are looking at two more appearances of Jesus in Jerusalem, one during the evening of that first day of the week and then a second on the second Sunday of Eastertide, which is today. This morning we will be hearing God's word from the Gospel of John 20:19-31. Hear now the reading of the Gospel.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 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 retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen

Let's journey through this morning's Gospel lesson and see what astonishment God's word holds for us today. First, let me provide a little background as a summary of what has already transpired on this first day. Mary Magdalene and other women have come back from their early morning visit to the tomb, and Mary Magdalene has declared to the disciples that she has seen the Lord! Peter and John have run to the tomb and found only the burial clothes of

Jesus. John has come to believe, based on the empty tomb, the sight of Jesus' burial clothes, and the witness of Mary Magdalene. It is now late in the day and the disciples are gathered in an upper room of a house with the doors locked. They are fearful that the Jewish authorities will come for them as they came for Jesus, so they have the doors closed. Locked is a good description for how we can think of the security in the room. Anyone trying to enter the upper room will need to deal with the closed doors.

Jesus comes and stands among the disciples in this secured upper room. He speaks to them, saying, "Peace be with you." These are physical actions. Jesus standing in the room is not an appearance or a collective remembrance of Jesus' spirit. These are physical actions carried out by a physical presence. This presence is equally confirmed by the disciples as they see and hear Jesus. John stresses this physical presence with the words he chooses. Jesus came, stood, and said. John's use of "came" for how Jesus arrives should remind us of Jesus' words in John's Gospel chapter 16:16 and 22. Verse 16 is "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me." John's stress, in this appearance in the upper room, is that the disciples see Jesus. And in 16:22 we are reminded of Jesus' words, "So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." These verses are from Jesus' farewell discourse when he tried to prepare the disciples for what was about to occur to him and them. Here in the upper room, Jesus comes to them and they see him again.

Jesus' greeting to the disciples, "Peace be with you," is a form of an ancient Hebrew greeting. I would like to encourage us in these days of social distancing to use this greeting to greet each other throughout the Easter season if not from now on. We should not be shaking hands or hugging, but we can greet each other as Jesus greeted his disciples with "Peace be with you." When we greet each other with the peace of Christ and really let that peace be present in us and be passed to others, Jesus' peace changes us and those we greet. It changes a potentially stressful greeting to a reminder that we live in the light of an empty tomb and a resurrected Lord. "Peace be with you" is an ancient Hebrew greeting. Here, Jesus uses it to speak to the disciples. So, let's use this greeting as we meet each other and see what blessings God has in store for us as we give the peace of Christ away in the midst of this storm from the Covid-19 virus.

Notice that all of the remaining disciples are present in the upper room except for Thomas. Peter is there after his early morning run to the empty tomb. John is there after seeing

the empty tomb and Jesus' burial clothes in the tomb. All of the disciples have heard Mary Magdalene tell of having seen Jesus and that she believes Jesus is alive. Others may be present in the room as well, but the focus is on the ten. Jesus then shows them his hands and his side. We should note that the disciples see these signs on Jesus' body. They witness the marks of one who was crucified. The reaction from the disciples is not fear but rejoicing. The appearance of divine beings, angels, always brings fear and awe to those present. Remember the angel at the tomb on Easter morning and how the guards became neutralized, paralyzed with fear. But here in the upper room, Jesus' presence brings peace and rejoicing. This difference is key. Don't miss this difference between the appearance of an angel and the physical presence of Jesus. The disciples are not filled with fear; their response is to rejoice. They are seeing Jesus again. Jesus has come and brought peace. We need to realize that this is true for us as well. We are able to connect with Jesus in a manner that we cannot connect with angels or other divine beings. Jesus is fully human and fully God. Jesus is the one who brings peace and rejoicing, and not fear. Jesus, in his resurrected body, brings to the disciples and us a new relationship with God. Peace is now with us, between us and God. Notice that the fear among the disciples is not fear of God or of a resurrected Jesus in their presence, but of the Jewish authorities who can only bring physical harm, but cannot damage their relationship with Jesus. This is another reason for using the greeting, "Peace be with you," when we meet. It is a reminder that we have a resurrected Lord who brings peace to us and our relationship with God.

Now we need to catch Jesus' next action. He greets the disciples again with, "Peace be with you," and then he breathes on them! On the cross, before he died, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30). His breathing ceased at that point, but here, in the upper room, we find another physical action from Jesus. Jesus breathes on his disciples. I think John is making the point that Jesus is alive. Now when Jesus breathes on them, he tells them to receive the Holy Spirit and then he sends them as the Father sent him, out into the world, in the power of the Holy Spirit, a power which they have now received. For those of you following in your Bibles, if you have not already underlined this passage, I would encourage you to do so now and to write in the margin of your Bible words to the effect of "Why is this different from the coming of the Holy Spirit in Luke's Book of Acts?" The answer to that question is long and interesting and one that we will address at another time. But, for this morning's sermon, let me focus us on one aspect of that answer. Let me take us back into the

creation story in Genesis 2:7-8 at the creation of the first man. Listen to God's Word, "Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." At creation, Adam has the breath of life breathed into him and he comes alive, a living being. Here, at the resurrection, at the first encounter between the disciples with the first born of the resurrection, breath comes from Jesus and enters the disciples and they become alive in Christ. They are charged to go out into the world as the Father sent Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notice that forgiveness of sin is connected to the breath of Jesus, but with his breathing on the disciples, forgiving of sins is also connected to the disciples' actions. Jesus paid our debt on the cross so that we can be forgiven, and now the disciples are commissioned to take this great news to the world. As they go, forgiveness of sin is spread as this Good News is believed in the hearts of those for whom the disciples become witnesses.

It is not clear in the scripture when Jesus leaves the upper room, but following this commissioning of the disciples, he seems to be gone from the upper room and from their sight. The disciples are left alone with joy in their hearts and a commissioning to share the Good News that Jesus is alive. At some point, Thomas rejoins the disciples, and when he does, they tell him what has happened, that "they have seen the Lord." Thomas is the first person we know of whom the disciples witness to in their new commissioning. Notice the words they use to share this Good News are similar to Mary's words when she describes her encounter with Jesus. The disciples say, "We have seen the Lord." Thomas does not believe them. He too wants what they have been given. He wants to see the Lord, to touch him, to verify that this body he sees bears the marks of crucifixion, Thomas needs proof! Witnesses speaking to him are not adequate, Thomas needs the Holy Spirit to enable him to believe. Thomas is like so many of us and those whom we meet in the world. Witnesses will not suffice for them to believe; they will only believe if they experience Jesus for themselves.

Now we jump forward in time to the next Sunday, to the next first day of the week. The disciples are all together, all eleven in the same upper room, the same secured doors. Even with the coming of a resurrected Jesus into the upper room, the disciples are still fearful of the Jewish authorities. Again, Jesus comes, stands among them, and speaks, "Peace be with you." And then he speaks directly to Thomas, offering him the opportunity to verify the crucifixion wounds that mark Jesus' hands and side. Jesus gives Thomas encouragement to believe, "Do not doubt, but

believe.” Jesus is telling Thomas to believe the witnesses who have shared their experience with him, to believe in the things the witnesses who are filled with the Holy Spirit say. Thomas is also to believe and then go and be a witness sharing the Good News with others.

Thomas believes, and his response to belief goes beyond all of the others who have recognized a resurrected Jesus. Thomas recognizes Jesus not only as Lord but as God! Thomas makes the connection with what it means for a crucified Lord to come, stand among them, and speak with them: this Lord is resurrected, this Lord must also be God. Thomas’ understanding of the resurrection has grown beyond the understanding of those present in the upper room, and he speaks that new understanding to Jesus and those present. Thomas has encountered a resurrected Jesus, and he believes in him, not just as his Lord, but as his God.

Jesus uses Thomas’ belief that comes with his sight of Jesus to give the disciples and us a beatitude. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Blessed are those who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, will believe the witnesses that Jesus sends, the words they write, the acts of love they leave, and the peace they spread.

John ends this scene in the upper room by declaring there is much more Jesus did in the presence of the disciples, but what John has written in his book, what he and the ten saw, heard, and experienced is now our witness to a resurrected Jesus. These disciples who saw Jesus, heard his words, and experienced his peace are a recorded witness, and this witness is enough for us who hear it to encounter Jesus, to believe in Jesus, and to have life in his name. Eternal life!

This week as you stay in and social distance, think about how Jesus’ words in the upper room speak to us today. We are not yet free to be sent out into the world, but there is a world of people waiting, watching, and hoping for Christ to come to them and bring peace into their lives, a world of people who will believe if we will share these words with them. Our prayers for a time such as this should become prayers for another great awakening of those around us who have not heard the Good News and believed. Our prayers should be for us to find new ways to share this Good News with others who are staying at home. We as those who have the Peace of Christ need to awaken to the realization that Jesus sends us out into the world to be his hands and feet. We are to be witnesses who show the world the marks of one who was crucified, so that they also may believe and have life in Jesus’ name. The witness that we have been given is the Word of God found in the Bible. That Word, God’s word, is alive. We need to gather together and read it, then go and share it as witnesses to what we have encountered. We need to struggle

with God's word and be open to being changed by it, and then allow the Holy Spirit to empower us to be living witnesses who come, give witness in word and deed, and bring peace that others may rejoice. Let me encourage each of us to join a Bible study, read the Word, and join together in letting it change us, and encourage others to change into a people who are sent as the Father sent the Son.

Our desire, and the desire of those in the world to whom we are sent is like Thomas' desire, for a witness that is sight. If we give them that, then they also will believe. Jesus will ascend into heaven, be seated at the right hand of God, and will come again in power and sight, a coming at which all will see him and some who do so will not respond with the receiving of peace. Instead, this coming will be a time when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Until then, we are to be his witnesses, in word and deed, to all who struggle to believe. People get ready, Jesus is coming. As John Wesley told us, so we need to put into practice today. We need to learn all that we can about Jesus from the Word his witnesses left us, and then "do all the good we can in all the places we can for all the people we can." Pray for an awakening. Pray for healing of the land and the healing of people. Pray for a chance to be a witness to another person who will not believe unless he or she sees Jesus. Go, stand among them, speak to them, show them the hands and spear-pierced side of Jesus and give to them the peace of a witness to a resurrected Lord and God. Peace be with you.

Pray with me: Father, open us to be your witnesses sent out into the world to testify to what we have discovered through the words of those who witnessed your resurrection. Lord, open our hearts to pray for your gift of the Holy Spirit and then breathe on us that we may become those who are alive in Christ and heading out into the world as the Father sent the Son. Give us your peace, Jesus, that we may share that peace with a world of people who are starving for peace. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission taking peace to all people.