

It was Sunday evening, between 6 and 9 p.m. It was the first Easter Sunday. The disciples had met secretly behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. Jesus had already appeared to Mary Magdalene and Peter, to some other women and to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. This, however, is the first official appearance to the apostles as a group. The Risen Christ spoke four short sentences:--

First, he said, "Peace be with you." He said this twice. This was the customary greeting in Palestine at that time. We say, "Hi, how are you?" They said, "Peace be with you." It's almost a little humorous to think of the Risen Christ appearing for the first time to his disciples and greeting them in the casual and customary way, "Hi, how are you? Peace be with you." The Risen Christ used very ordinary words on this very extraordinary occasion. But these ordinary words are charged with extraordinary meaning.

What sort of peace did the apostles need at that time? For one thing their hearts and minds needed to be put at peace because they had all forsaken Jesus in his time of trial and death. They forsook him and fled. Their greatest need was forgiveness and assurance of pardon. How could they proclaim forgiveness and the peace of God to others until they had been forgiven and been granted the peace of Christ themselves?

Our first need, also, before we will want to have an active part in the local and world-wide mission of the church is forgiveness of our sins and the assurance of forgiveness. Every Sunday we hear the assurance of pardon spoken following our corporate confession of sin. This is not a formality for me. I need to hear that assurance of pardon weekly, daily even as I must confess my sins daily. Is the forgiveness of sins a felt reality in your lives? Have you ever heard the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ speak peace to you. That is something I must listen for everyday of my life. To hear Jesus say to me daily, "Peace be with you."

Christ came to preach peace to us who like the twelve are daily prone to forsake Christ and deny him. There is a note of intense joy and confidence when Paul writes to his friends later, in the fifth chapter of Romans, "Now that we have been put right with God through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." This peace with God comes about not through our efforts but by God's outgoing love seen in the death of Christ.

The peace which the Risen Christ gave was also the peace that comes when our doubts about the Christian faith are resolved. How will we ever have the courage to tell

someone about the forgiveness Christ offers as long as our hearts and minds are filled with gnawing doubts about the truth of the resurrection. Some of you may be in that very condition. You have some doubt about the truth of the Christian faith. Perhaps you think of yourself as an agnostic. Many church members are in this condition and it undermines our commitment to evangelism and missions.

The Rev. Paul Zahl, curate of Grace Episcopal church in New York City, went to visit one of his more delightful and good-natured parishioners whose heart was failing... She turned to him and said, "When it comes to the afterlife and God and Jesus, I don't think I believe any of it. I am not sure I believe any of it." This woman was in despair inwardly even though on the surface she had always exhibited such a wonderful spirit of happiness and fellowship. So it is with many good church members. There is doubt, troubling doubt which is never really expressed and that doubt inhibits our full-fledged support of the mission of the church in our giving and in our own involvement.

The disciples who were gathered behind closed doors were troubled by doubt as well as by guilt. So when Jesus appeared in their midst he showed them his wounded hands and side as evidence that he was not a ghost but the same

Jesus risen from the dead. The same Jesus who had been crucified, dead, and buried, rose from the dead and came to his disciples to dispel their inhibiting fears and doubts.

Do you harbor suspicions and doubts about the truth of the Christian faith, about the resurrection of Christ or some other vital event in the history of salvation? You will never become enthusiastic about fulfilling the mission of the church until the Holy Spirit removes the veil of doubt from your eyes and gives you peace and assurance that Christ is risen indeed. Sometimes simply feeling free to unburden yourselves to a trusted friend or pastor is all it takes. Sometimes questions need to be answered before the doubts are dispelled. Many a person who was once filled with doubt is now a committed Christian. And often those who have been given peace about the truth of the Christian faith after having doubted become the most committed and enthusiastic of Christ's disciples.

Secondly, Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." In these words Jesus told his church that our mission is not only one of preaching and teaching but also a ministry of healing and identification with sinners, the poor, the weak, and the exploited. Our mission is to carry on the mission of Christ. "As the Father has sent me."

How did God send his son? He sent him to preach and teach but also to heal the sick, to cast out demons, to identify with sinners, and to rebuke those who were quite orthodox and evangelical because they had forgotten about justice, mercy, and compassion.

For this reason we as Christ's church are involved in our mission work, not only in evangelism but also in defending the rights of the poor and speaking out against oppression in the world and identifying with notorious sinners. We are involved in nursing homes. We come to the aid of prisoners and seek justice for the oppressed and exploited. We rebuke those whose policies and actions oppress their fellows. Often within the church we hear voices of protest saying the church should stick to preaching the gospel and should not become involved in social issues. But the Risen Christ has sent us to do what the Father sent him to do. So we are under a divine mandate not only to preach the gospel of personal salvation but also to heal, to cast out demons, to preach liberty to the captives and to identify with sinners.

I once heard Kay's grandmother who is now 94 years old tell a story about a large statue of Christ in Holland. The hands of the statue were blown off by gun-fire during WWII. After the war the people of the town wanted to restore

the hands of Christ. After a lot of discussion they finally decided to erect a sign at the feet of the statue of Christ which read, "Jesus has no hands but ours." Now I think there is some sound truth in that if we take into consideration the Biblical metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ. We are his hands and feet to carry on his mission of preaching, teaching and healing in the world today.

Thirdly, Jesus said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Here we have a dramatic anticipation of Pentecost when he would pour out the Spirit upon them and clothe them with power from on high for their mission. How much we as a church and as individuals need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. How powerless we are as individuals and as a church without the Holy Spirit. Apart from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the mission of the church will never be accomplished and it will not be accomplished because we will not have the desire to see it accomplished, nor will we be willing to pay the price of its accomplishment, nor will we have the power to accomplish it.

Edwin Hatch wrote,

Breathe on me, Breath of God
 Fill me with life anew,
 That I may love what thou dost love,
 And do what Thou wouldst do.

Leighton Ford once related that Billy Graham was being led on a tour of a prestigious evangelical church by some of the church elders. One of the elders was proddly confiding how that the session had recently took the bold step of disciplining with excommunication a man who drank to much. After all the man was violating a command of Scripture, "Be not drunk with wine." Dr. Graham, apparently wasn't that impressed because he responded, "When was the last time you disciplined anybody for not be filled with the Spirit. The verse that says, 'Be not drunk with wine' goes on to command more positively, "But be ye filled with the Spirit."

We as a church need to be brought to our knees in humility. We need to cry out to God to empower us with his Holy Spirit to do our mission here in the community and throughout the world. The history of the church is re-splendant with the stories of churches and congregations which have come alive as the Holy Spirit has come upon them in power to motivate them to do Christ's work.

Fourth, the Risen Christ said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Here is a verse which not all Christians are agreed upon as to how to interpret it. Some churches have taught that Christ has given priests

the authority to forgive sins to the exclusion of the laity. In other words the minister or priest in some churches will say, following the confession of sin, Absolvo te, I absolve you. Protestant churches, for the most part understand this verse differently.

Christ was not giving his disciples the power to forgive sins. Only God can forgive sins. He was simply telling them in a dramatic way to proclaim with authority the conditions upon which God forgives or withholds forgiveness. And so when I pronounce the assurance of pardon I do not forgive sins, I merely pronounce the promise and conditions of forgiveness. The mission of the church of which you and I are members is to proclaim these conditions of forgiveness, not merely in church but in the world as well. John Stott has written, "The whole world is burdened with a bad conscience; mental institutions are full of guilt-laden souls. But the church has a message that can set men free, and it must proclaim that message with authority and without compromise! It is a message of blessing and of judgment: of the remission of sins to those who repent and believe, and of the retention of sins to those who will not."

In summary then: These words of Christ spoken on the morning of the first Easter Sunday emphasize four marks of Christian mission.

First, when we ourselves have experienced peace with God and our doubts have been laid to rest and we have peace in our hearts concerning the truth of the Christian faith we are better able to become involved ourselves in the mission of the church.

Secondly, the mission of a truly Biblical church will be a mission of healing and identification with sinners, the poor, the exploited and oppressed as well as preaching and teaching. As God the Father sent his Son, so has Christ sent us.

Thirdly, the mission of a truly Biblical church is carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit

Fourthly, the mission of the church is marked with an authoritative proclamation of the terms of peace and forgiveness.

This was the risen Lord's word to the infant church when it was still in hiding. My prayer is that his word might be heard again by us today and so bring us out from our closed doors and out into the world to fulfill Christ's mission here and throughout the world. As the Father sent the Son, so also the Risen Christ sends us. Are we willing to go?

AMEN