

PEACE BE WITH YOU

In our Christian liturgy, as we imitate the Lord's blessing of his disciples, we say, "Peace be with you." It may be routine for us, but do we pause to think about peace for ourselves as members of a military community or for veterans who have participated in the Korean, Vietnam, or Gulf Wars? From my experience, personnel in the military community desire peace more than anybody, since they know what war involves, and many have suffered the pain and trauma of the raw reality and violence of war.

In the days of our Lord, the people of Palestine knew the ravages of turmoil and war. Not much has changed in that part of the world in so many years! The flux and change of the "power brokers" in some parts of the world today is not unlike what the ancient inhabitants of the Land knew. But Rome changed that beginning with the rule of Caesar Augustus and his son Tiberias. With what has been called *pax Romana*, the peace of Rome, came years of unprecedented peace for the Mediterranean World. But that peace bore a price. Peace always costs, and sometimes it is a high price but generally worth that high price.

One price paid for the *pax Romana* was the swift but cruel execution of violent criminals and insurrectionists by crucifixion. And then, in the small eastern Roman province of Judea, around 30 AD, there was, instead of Barabbas, the price paid by Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a wandering rabbi, a prophet, and a healer, and he preached for three years before he was put on trial by the Jewish Sanhedrin and by Pilate, the Roman governor of the province. He was condemned on charges of blasphemy according to Jewish law and on charges of insurrection according to Roman law. He was sentenced to death, and he was crucified. All of this was done in the interests of *pax Romana*, the peace of Rome.

The small band of followers of Jesus witnessed his violent death. Their hopes and their dreams were shattered. I can imagine that they felt anything but peace in their hearts. In fact, we are told that the eleven disciples gathered only behind locked doors, because they were fearful for their own lives. They were without a leader. They were disturbed. They were shocked. And they were without peace.

Those of us in the military are familiar with situations devoid of peace. We have seen pictures of war zones—those in Vietnam, in the Balkan peninsula, in Afghanistan, in Iraq. Or maybe we have been eyewitnesses to the carnage of fighting. And here in the United States we have seen, or been involved in, a traffic accident, the chaos of a hospital emergency room, the brutality on our city streets, or even the domestic violence in some of our homes.

Our Lord comes to us in each and every one of these situations, he calms our fears, and he says to us, “Peace be with you . . .” You see, after Jesus was crucified, he was buried, but on the third day his tomb was found empty. Then Jesus appeared to his followers. When he appeared to them after his resurrection, what were his first words to them? Listen to the testimony of his beloved disciple John:

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.”¹

Three times in the gospel of John, compare the one time in Luke 24.36-49, Jesus says, “Peace be with you.” It was important for Jesus to reestablish peace in the hearts of the disciples.

And this matter of peace is important for us as well. Why do we have peace? Jesus is with us. He is alive, not dead. We have hope, not despair. Even in life and death situations, we, like the disciples, need not fear. We know that his presence is real.

We have peace, because he gives us forgiveness from our sins. The greatest turmoil in anyone’s life is very simple. It is sin. But this greatest turmoil is remedied by Jesus. There is a very important connection between the death of Jesus, his resurrection, and our forgiveness. It is something we should not miss. The book of Hebrews, for example, is a lengthy argument about Jesus acting as our high priest to make atonement for our sins. This he accomplished when he was exalted to the right hand of God after his resurrection and ascension. And Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says:

Jesus our Lord . . . was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.²

The resurrection of Jesus means that new life, not sin through death, now rules supreme. It is simply ours to accept through believing, turning to God, and receiving the Holy Spirit at baptism.

¹John 20.19-29, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

²Romans 4.24–5.5, NRSV.

Finally, we have peace, because the price for peace already has been paid. It was for the *pax Romana*, the peace of Rome, in a political sense, that Jesus was crucified. That was what the Jewish leaders in Judea thought. That was what Pilate, the Roman procurator, thought. But a far greater work for peace occurred when Jesus was crucified. The Son of God paid the price for peace for all of us for all time. Remember how Jesus approached Thomas. “Look! My hands. Look! My side. Believe!” Jesus says to each of us: “Peace be with you . . . Look! Here I am! Believe!” The price is already paid! For peace!

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4.7; NRSV).

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.³

³Hebrews 13.20-21; NRSV.