

# *“The Greeting”*

*Easter 2A*  
*John 20:19-31*

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine  
Associate Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

*Prayer for Illumination: Gracious God, our Easter faith is growing tired. Come, reveal yourself to us again. Breathe on your disciples here with your Spirit and open our hearts to receive your peace. Amen.*

Our text today reminds us that Easter evening was a scary time for Jesus' disciples. They were afraid and hid in a locked room. Jesus snuck in that locked room and offered a breath of life. He offered four words, "Peace with be you!" Those four words changed the world. In the most terrifying of days for those disciples, when Jesus showed up, he offered a faithful presence that seeks shalom for all. It was a catalyst for making the world better.

The passing of the peace is an ancient tradition in the Church, dating back to the second and third centuries. In almost all of Paul's letters in the New Testament, we find a greeting of peace and an invitation to his readers to offer this peace to one another. This greeting is one of the ways we welcome one another, extend Christian hospitality, offer forgiveness and "respond to God's act of reconciliation by exchanging signs and words . . . of Christ's peace."

As we demonstrated earlier in the worship service, for some of us it feels strange to move up out of our seats and interact with the person next to us. Worship might be the only place we experience quiet and rest during our week and here we go,

disrupting the quiet and rest by making you interact with people. But here's the rub—quiet and restful isn't really the Easter story, nor the Easter season itself. When I read the resurrection stories in John or any other Gospel, no one reacts to Jesus with reverence and calm.

Last week, on Easter Sunday, the women at the tomb were perplexed, uncertain, scared and awed. This week, more than any other emotion, the disciples are huddled in fear when they encounter Jesus. Look at our text for today—the disciples are so afraid that they are practically paralyzed in a closed room. They have likely heard the Easter reports from Peter and Mary Magdalene by now, but still they remain frozen and scared. But, Jesus knows their fear. In the midst of the locked room, Jesus enters and speaks these words: “Peace be with you.”

In fact, the fear and hesitation of the disciples is so powerful that Jesus speaks words of peace to them three times. Moving beyond that, he lets the disciples, Thomas most notably, touch his hands and his side. “Peace be with you,” he says. For the disciples, peace is not found in words only, but in the physical contact between the disciples and their Messiah. The peace that Christ offers is found in his very flesh, in the physical wounds that prove the depths of his love. As is true in most cases, we're not so different from those disciples. We have our

own ways of locking ourselves up in fear, confusion, or denial in response to the Easter news.

It was a turn of events for this parishioner. She filed for divorced and was leaving a failing marriage, her only way to maintain health and life after years of hurting and living in fear. Her children were confused and afraid of what their life would look like now. Heather had been absent from church for a while as all this was going on. But one day, as they prayer of confession was introduced she stood in the doorway. She froze. Stunned at where she would sit, now that her family situation was different. She couldn't sit in her same place, (that didn't feel right). She looked down at her bulletin as they collectively read that prayer, asking God to forgive the things we'd done and left undone. Then the gathered community passed the peace of Christ. The minister said something like, "God loves and forgives us, so let us see one another as loved and forgiven. Let us share the peace of Christ with one another."

Two long time members had also seen Heather in that doorway---looking lost and alone. They left their pews, extended their hands and invited her to sit with them. Heather sat in between them that morning. She came to worship lost and alone, ashamed and scared of the chaos in her life. But people saw her, they felt her fear and they held her hands. They gave her peace. (You could see the tears trickling down her

face.) She and her children returned to sit with that same couple week after week. They gave her a place. They gave her peace. They gave her community. Worship became a place of peace for Heather again.<sup>1</sup>

Friends, the Easter message is one of peace. But it's a peace that demands that we move beyond our locked-up selves. After Easter, Jesus could have stayed in that locked room with the disciples. He could have stayed hidden away, and only shared peace with them. But he didn't. Instead, Jesus spoke words of peace for everyone, a peace he had promised them many times in his ministry. Then, Jesus gave the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit—a gift and a power that moved them to share that peace with others.

We've been given that same gift, given the gift to share peace with each other, and soon we will be commanded back outside to share it with our neighbor, our city and the world.

Our Risen Lord commissions us to go and continue the work of his earthly ministry, and that ministry is one of peace, shalom, healing, wholeness, well-being, reconciliation. When we pass the peace on any given Sunday, that is what we affirm.

Passing the peace in our worship service may seem like a simple act, to some it may seem simply intrusive. But, friends, there's

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Rev. Rebekah Hutto, for this story of a former parishioner. Used with permission.

nothing simple about it. Exchanging peace with a touch and a welcome from Christ is powerful, a reminder that what occurs in this place does matter, in my life and in yours and in your neighbor's.

The magnitude of this exchange is mind blowing if we stop for just a second and think about it. We are practicing within the crucible of worship what we are to be doing out in the world, every day, offering, extending, living in ways that further and foster shalom, the saving, healing wholeness, mercy, grace and love of Jesus Christ. "*Just as the Father has sent me, Jesus says, I send you.*"<sup>2</sup> Christ's peace is an everyday opportunity to enact our relationship with God and with one another.

In this peace, we touch the small hand of an excited child, the frail hand of an elderly woman or man, the tentative hand of the introvert, the weary hand of someone who mourns. In this peace, we welcome those who are scared, we forgive the sinner, and we make a place for someone who feels alone.

Welcoming Christ's peace into our worship is anything but simple. It's a welcome that takes us outside of ourselves and into our neighbors' lives; and it's a welcome that allows them into ours. It is this peace that Christ so desperately desires for his church to have.

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Duffield, The Outlook Magazine online, [www.pres-outlook.org](http://www.pres-outlook.org), April 17, 2017.

When we greet one another in church we do it differently from any greeting in the world around us. Instead of saying “Good Morning” or catching up with a friend, complimenting someone on a tie or scarf, or catching up on last night’s game score, we take this opportunity to give to one another the extraordinary gift that Jesus gave to his disciples, all those years ago. We don’t just think about the peace, or imagine the peace in those moments, no, it’s the passing/sharing/getting out of your seat and risk being vulnerable for the sake of the gospel. It’s the reconciling work of God in us and through us---we get to participate in it.

Since God has forgiven us, we are set free to forgive one another. There is no “Maybe” in this act. It’s not MAY the Peace of Christ be with you....God has already done God’s work and we, sisters and brothers get to claim it and share it. Every time we extend our hands and our arms to greet one another –we come close to claiming our actions as sacramental--as an outward and visible sign of an invisible grace given to us from God in Jesus Christ.

What strikes me about this holy interaction is that sharing God’s peace is also an antidote to fear. There is so much to fear in our world today, at so many levels. Fear of financial insecurity. Fear of democracy in a tailspin. The fear of a nuclearized world on the brink. Fear of lone attackers. Fear of

the police. Fear of our neighbor. The fear is real. Christ broke down the dividing walls of fear and insecurity and gave his life so that we may live in a world free of fear. God is working to make the peace of Christ a reality in our world. When we treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ we participate in that reconciling work.

Pastoral colleagues of mine have taken on the important work of making the Peace of Christ relevant in their worship. They introduce the passing of the peace differently each Sunday as a way of making the words and actions of the Christ's peace come alive. Here are few that resonate for me:

*Accepting God's love for us, we are called to love one another.*

*In the community of faith, we learn to work together for peace.*

*When we pass the peace, we make the vital connection between our relationship with God and our relationships with one another.*

*Turn and offer peace to one another - this is our most important work this morning - to greet one another with the peace we've just received from God.*

Friends, peace is what we all need, but we're not always going to find it sitting still, calmly and reverently to worship. Remember, Christ has been known to sneak in through locked

doors and disturb the quiet of those around him. His peace is intrusive, and it's a gift he's given all of us to share. Today of all days, let's try this again. If you missed it. If you are yearning for another try at it and can't wait 'til next week. If you need another helping of God's forgiving grace poured out for you and all of us----let's try passing the peace of Christ again. I really mean it.

*Do you need the peace of the Lord today? Are you struggling with worry? with fear? with hopelessness? Then, this part of the service may be for you.*

*The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!*

*And also with you.*

*Let us share the peace of Christ with one another. Amen.*

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