

John 20:19-31

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.

Being a People of Peace

"The first job of the Church is to make the world the world."¹

We make the world the world simply by the Church actually being the Church. We often talk about how the Kingdom of God is a different way of ordering our lives than our world would understand. We have a different social hierarchy where the King and author of life becomes a servant and gives his life for those who love him not. We have a different economy which asks not how much can you acquire but how much can you give away. We have a different initiation into this way of life perhaps best captured in the baptism of infants and young children *like Kinna, Abigail, and Emma who will be baptized shortly*. When you have a baby, the world throws you a party and gives you onesies that say something like "I'm cute; Mom's hot; Dad's lucky." The Church looks you in the eye and tell you that your kids are not making it out of here alive but that Christ has overcome death so you need not be afraid. We bury your child with

¹ Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has argued this pointed in many places. Check *Resident Aliens* or *The Peaceable Kingdom* for more on this phrase.

Christ in his death and raise her to new life in his resurrection. We mark her forehead with the horrific and shameful sign of a torture device—the cross—which has become for us the means of eternal life. Life in the Kingdom of God is a contrary life indeed!

There is a contrariness to Easter, too. Jesus is supposed to be dead. He's supposed to be this really great guy who lived once and said some revolutionary things that got him killed—but he's not dead, is he? He is alive. He is risen and his Kingdom is already here. For the Church, it is not about questioning the historical record but about being put into question by one who has broken every rule of ordinary human existence.² Can we be an Easter people? Can we live contrary lives—lives of resurrection in a world where death abounds?

On Easter at our noon service, last Sunday, Lauren preached and referenced a Wendell Berry poem called “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.” Well this morning we have another lesson from the Mad Farmer himself, Wendell Berry. Now I am aware that it is both hard for listeners to understand poetry on first hearing it and bad form for a preacher to quote a lot of it. Lauren gave you a few bite-sized pieces of a poem and that's because she's a more precise preacher than me and one with way more experience. But I figure that nothing I will say will match Wendell Berry's words so you're about to get the whole thing. This poem is called “The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer.” It captures something of life in the Kingdom of God:

I am done with apologies. If contrariness is my inheritance and destiny, so be it. If it is my mission to go in at exits and come out at entrances, so be it. I have planted by the stars in defiance of the experts, and tilled somewhat by incantation and by singing, and reaped, as I knew, by luck and Heaven's favor, in spite of the best advice. If I have been caught so often laughing at funerals, that was because I knew the dead were already slipping away, preparing a comeback, and can I help it? And if at weddings I have gritted and gnashed my teeth, it was because I knew where the bridegroom had sunk his manhood, and knew it would not be resurrected by a piece of cake. ‘Dance,’ they told me, and I stood still, and while they stood quiet in line at the gate of the Kingdom, I danced. ‘Pray,’ they said, and I laughed, covering myself in the earth's brightnesses, and then stole off gray into the midst of a revel, and prayed like an orphan. When they said, ‘I know my Redeemer liveth,’ I told them, ‘He's dead.’ And when they told me ‘God is dead,’ I answered, ‘He goes fishing every day in the Kentucky River. I see Him often.’ When they asked me would I like to contribute I said no, and when they had collected more than they needed, I gave them as much as I had. When they asked me to join them I wouldn't, and then went off by myself and did more

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus*.

than they would have asked. ‘Well, then,’ they said
‘go and organize the International Brotherhood
of Contraries,’ and I said, ‘Did you finish killing
everybody who was against peace?’ So be it.
Going against men, I have heard at times a deep harmony
thrumming in the mixture, and when they ask me what
I say I don’t know. It is not the only or the easiest
way to come to the truth. It is one way.³

I’m not entirely sure what happened on that first Easter or on the days in between that Friday which we call Good and the Sunday of resurrection. Like Thomas, I’ve got a few questions myself. But here is what I trust happened and how it’s changed the course of my life. When Jesus died a violent and horrific death, he was somehow taking on the sin of the world. When I say “sin,” I’m not exactly talking about the rules that you have broken. (How terribly modern of us to think that Christ’s death was just all about me!) I’m saying that Jesus took on brokenness itself which had defined our universe for far too long. He took on the violence and prejudice and hatred of our world. He took on the forces which traffic people or monger in fear or profit from death.

When God raised Christ from the dead, he defeated all of that brokenness and rebellion. God’s Kingdom has won and we are citizens of that victorious, Easter Kingdom. The Church is a herald and a foretaste and a sign of this contrary way of life so that how we live as the Body of Christ models God’s Kingdom to the world.⁴

What then, we should ask, does life in the Kingdom of God look like for us?

There are many ways in which the Church is to be an experience of the Kingdom of God, but there is just one way that I’ll get into in light of our Gospel reading today. Jesus breaks into a fear-filled upper room and he says, not once, not twice, but three times: Peace be with you.

This *peace* is not a hello. It’s not a handshake. This peace of Christ is the deep *shalom* of God. This is what happens when the cosmos is realigned and God takes back the world God made. This peace is what comes when God loves us beyond our violent nature. It is a gift of God.

If Christians are anything, we are a people who take peace seriously. We are citizens of the peaceable Kingdom of God. We are followers of the Prince of Peace. Is there anything more contrary in our country than being a people dedicated to making peace? We are a culture which glamorizes and glorifies violence and then we wonder why some confused lonely teenaged boy shoots up a school. We celebrate when TV shows can depict violence more gruesomely and terribly than ever before. “How groundbreaking,” we say, “We’ve never seen a head explode so realistically before.” We are a nation engaged, right now, in the longest running war in our country’s history and most of us cannot articulate what exactly we are hoping to accomplish through strategic violence, much less argue that it’s worth that goal.

My friends, we cannot solve all of the problems of our society but we can model an alternative way of ordering our lives—a Kingdom way. We can remain dedicated and committed to the peace which Christ has won for us. We can be known as a people who take peace seriously. Now I’m aware that much of this talk is rather lofty and relies on deeply theological language so let’s

³ <https://onbeing.org/poetry/the-contrariness-of-the-mad-farmer/>

⁴ See Phil Kenneson’s and James Street’s *Selling out the Church* for more on this.

talk about practicing peace, about practicing resurrection. How do we as the Church live more fully into the Easter victory of Christ and the peaceable Kingdom of God?

First of all, a Church which takes peace seriously doesn't gloss over the word peace as we pray for it. Have you noticed how often in our liturgy we talk about and pray for peace? We share the peace with one another, we ask for God to send us out into the world in peace, we receive the blessing of "the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ." A Church which takes peace seriously yearns for it, longs for it, prays for it, and receives it as a gift from God.

Secondly, as followers of the Prince of Peace, we must take seriously Jesus' command for us to pray for our enemies. Spend time in silent prayer regularly and then dare to ask God to be with those with whom you struggle each day or those in your life whom you cannot stand. If you really want to do something that is hard and filled with grace, then try praying aloud for those with whom you struggle, including our national enemies. *What does a church look like who prays for Al-Qaeda or prays for Russia, asking God to be with them and to reconcile us?* This is really hard work; I do not like that Jesus commanded it. I don't know if such prayer changes our enemies—that's up to God to work out—but I know it transforms who we are and makes us more like Christ who did the same.

Finally, a practical way you can experience the Peace of God which passes all understanding, is to become a peacemaker. Who in your life can you reconcile with? Chances are the death and resurrection of Christ is bigger than your foibles. Write a letter, make a phone call, get a cup of coffee with someone; be vulnerable. And look for other opportunities in your life to wage peace on our world. When you come across someone who is angry or afraid and it gets directed at you, smile at them and treat them with an irrational love. This doesn't mean letting people walk all over you. I never saw Jesus do that. It means trusting that God's love is enough and we only need to be faithful to it.

Life in the peaceable Kingdom of God is a contrary life and it's hard, but through it God is making us and our world whole again. Remember that Christ has done the hardest and most wonderfully contrary thing for us, so we walk the way of peace. As Wendell Berry wrote, "Going against men, I have heard at times a deep harmony thrumming in the mixture, and when they ask me what I say... I don't know. It is not the only or the easiest way to come to the truth. It is one way."⁵

⁵ <https://onbeing.org/poetry/the-contrariness-of-the-mad-farmer/>