

“Peace be with you.”

John 20:19-31

Introduction

Read the whole of John 20. Read it slowly. Pause between scenes and ponder what’s going on, what the mood of the people, what the conversations are. Imagine yourself being there, either as a bystander or as one of the characters. Reflect on what you are seeing and feeling. When Jesus speaks, imagine him speaking to you.

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Imagine being in Jerusalem that first Sunday. From first light there are reports that a man, Jesus, King of the Jews, crucified and buried on Friday, is, three days later, alive.

Imagine the worldwide interest. Newspaper journalists and TV crews from everywhere descend on Jerusalem. News helicopters buzz overhead. Scheduled radio and television programmes are replaced by continuous news reporting.

Imagine that people have stopped their usual Sunday activities. Department stores and supermarkets are closed; sports fixtures are postponed.

Nothing like this has happened before. It’s truly unprecedented.

Of course, there are numerous questions and endless speculation. Who is it? Where is he now? Who saw him? Where are these witnesses? Was he really dead? How is it possible?

Political leaders and religious leaders hold press conferences. There will be an inquiry, of course. The opposition say that occurrences like this should have been planned for; those in authority should resign.

Leading medical specialists, professors no less, calmly state, “Follow the science.”

Experts in executions, in demand for their opinion, say, “It’s our job. No one survives a crucifixion.”

Witnesses to Jesus’ death are brought in front of the cameras. Graphically, they describe what they saw. “His side was pierced,” they said, “blood and water poured out. He was dead alright!”

The Chief Priests claim the body was stolen by the man’s followers. But this conflicts with eye-witness accounts that he is alive. The Chief Priest’s claim does not make sense. Why steal the body and take time to carefully unwrap it first? Photographs from the tomb show the linens that wrapped the dead body are just where the body had laid, as if the body itself just disappeared.

More reports come in. This time from near Emmaus – Jesus has been seen talking with two walkers.

It’s evening now. It’s getting dark. The disciples of Jesus have not been seen all day. Where are they?

In fear of the Jewish leaders – surely these same people would be coming after them next – the disciples lock themselves inside a room.

Imagine being with or being one of the disciples. What are the disciples or you feeling? Are you feeling lost. Lonely perhaps. Or leaderless. After all, the man who you were convinced was the Messiah had been killed. The mission to which they had given their entire lives was now suddenly over. Life was never going to be the same.

Chances are each one of us has put our faith in someone or something only to be left heartbroken, abused, neglected or cheated. And when this happens, we also want to lock ourselves away – literally or figuratively. Or perhaps you are feeling guilty about something. Or ashamed.

We may comfort ourselves by being alone, deliberately keeping the door closed on our family and friends. We may comfort ourselves by eating either too much or what we know is unhealthy for us. Or we may drink too much. We may plunge ourselves into our work. Or indulge in some retail therapy, the online variety of course.

Take a moment to be honest with yourself about how you are feeling right now. Can you name your emotions? Anxiety? Fear? Confusion? Loneliness? Or something else – guilt perhaps, or shame?

Imagine still being in the locked room with the disciples.

Jesus comes and stands among you. No locked door, literal or figuratively, can separate you from the risen Christ. It's been said before – no social distancing can separate us from the risen Christ.

Jesus comes and stands among you. Let this sink in for a moment.

What does Jesus say? Looking you in your eyes, he says, "Peace be with you!"

He doesn't say, "I'm risen! Alleluia!" but "Peace be with you!" "Shalom", a standard Jewish greeting, sounding similar in Hebrew and Aramaic. Probably a greeting Jesus and his disciples have used all their lives.

So why record this greeting now? "Peace be with you," is of special significance to the disciple's state of mind, and to your state of mind.

The first word they and you hear Jesus say is "peace." Peace – not blame. Peace – not fault-finding. Peace – not rebuke.

Jesus doesn't wait for his disciples to get their act together and show more faith before appearing to them. He meets his scared followers in their locked room and greets them with peace. He meets us, you and me, where we are and greets us with peace.

I don't know whether the disciples take this in. Their circumstances haven't changed. Peace comes not because their circumstances have suddenly become easy – the disciples are still wanted men – peace comes because Jesus is present with them. Jesus is present with us.

Probably still shocked and surprised, Jesus shows them his hands and side. "Look! This really is me. Yes, I was dead – here are the wounds to prove it. It is me, Jesus, your friend, your Lord."

The mood in the room has changed. Realising who he is the disciples are overjoyed when they see their Lord. We're not told whether they say anything. But I would be surprised if they just sit there, arms crossed and with heads down, not looking at each other, not saying anything. They were overjoyed!

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." Breathe – another sign of life; it's what God breathed into man when he formed him out of dust; it's what the mother and midwife want to see and hear immediately after the baby's birth.

For the last year we've been encouraged to keep socially distanced and to wear face masks in indoor public spaces. But now, imagine Jesus breathing on you. His is a life-affirming breathe. Take a moment to rest and invite the Holy Spirit to fill your heart and mind with peace.

As the presence of Jesus reassured his first disciples, may we also know Jesus' presence with us in all that we are going through at this time.

May we know his peace within us, the peace of Jesus that passes all understanding and that can only come from him.

May we bring his peace to others, sharing his peace with those who don't yet know it, and champion his peace in a broken world.

May God empower us by the Holy Spirit to be agents of his peace and forgiveness.

Amen.