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Easter 3 – John 20:19-31 – Peace be with You!

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*Grace, mercy and peace are yours* from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What do the words I just spoke mean to you? You've heard them a handful of times from me now, and probably hundreds of times from other pastors who have stood before you. *Grace, mercy, and peace are yours* – these are words that we Christians can never hear enough because they mean everything for us and for our spiritual lives, or at least they should.

But if you're like me and you've grown up in the church, maybe those words don't have quite the impact that they're supposed to anymore. Maybe you've heard them literally thousands of times on weekends, and they've become nothing more than a formality to you – just a few church words that pastors use to signal that their sermon's starting now.

But I hope not, because those aren't just empty words. It's quite the opposite, in fact – without those words, our Christian faith would be empty. Without God's grace and mercy that sent this fallen world a Savior that we didn't deserve, we could have no peace with God and we could never even think of calling him our Father. That's why it meant so much in the lesson I read for you before when Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter evening and the first thing he said was, "*Peace be with you!*" Those words were life changing, and they must have hit the disciples like a ton of bricks considering everything they'd been through in the last few days. But Jesus greeted his disciples that way for the same reason that I greet you that way at the beginning of each sermon, to remind you of who you are and what you have because of what Jesus has done for you. And ever since the time of Christ, Christians have been blessed to have that same certainty. So people of God, this Easter season especially, know that grace, mercy, and peace are yours in abundance because Christ is risen and because God's Word is trustworthy.

But that peace must've seemed anything but certain to the disciples before Jesus showed up. Only a few days earlier, Jesus told them that one of them would betray him and that all of them would deny and abandon him. Then the next day Jesus would be arrested, beaten, and crucified, and no doubt once that happened the world would turn against them, too.

So then fast forward to our story for today, which picks up on Easter evening with the disciples huddled together, cowering behind closed doors for fear that soon they might have to meet the same fate that Jesus did. They were scared and confused, and with the authorities searching for them it must have seemed like the walls were closing in and they were only hiding from the inevitable.

But then "*Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'* After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, '*Peace be with you!.. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*'" Jesus sure does know how to make an entrance, doesn't he? The disciples thought they were alone, with the doors locked so no one could get in; but then all of the sudden Jesus appeared right in their midst. The disciples thought that Jesus was dead and that his body had been stolen; but Christ was risen – Jesus was alive and was standing right before their very eyes. The disciples were ashamed of how they abandoned Jesus on the night he was betrayed and they were afraid of what might happen to them when they left that house; but then Jesus brought them comfort, "Peace be with you!" And those words meant that nothing in this world would ever be the same. Peace be with you, because Christ is risen.

See, because Christ is risen, that means you can be sure that your sins are forgiven and you have true peace with God. Were the disciples wrong to deny Jesus? Certainly. Were they right to be ashamed of abandoning him? Absolutely. They deserved for Jesus to abandon them just like they had abandoned him. And truth be told, the same goes for us – even though our denials of Jesus might not always be so publicized. But when you avoid talking about religion at work or school because you don't want to stand out or be looked down on or ridiculed, or when you don't stand up for what Jesus says is right in a society that loves what's wrong, that's denying Jesus just like the disciples did.

But Jesus didn't come to the disciples that day and say, "to hell with you!" and he doesn't say that to you, either. He says "Peace be with you!" because Christ is risen. See, Christ's death was the payment to take away all your sins, and when he rose again from the dead, he proved that he won the victory over sin and death. Christ proved that his sacrifice was acceptable to God so that he would never hold any of your sins against you. Because Christ is risen, you can be absolutely sure that all your sins are

forgiven, that God is truly your heavenly Father, and that you have real spiritual peace because of what your Savior Jesus has done for you.

And because Christ is risen, that means you have the certainty of eternal life and you can be at peace no matter what happens in this world. No, it didn't seem very peaceful to the disciples outside that little locked room. People hated them. People wanted to kill them. If they stepped outdoors, they knew their lives were in danger. But here stood their Savior, risen from the dead, proclaiming for them the forgiveness of their sins and the inheritance of heaven that was theirs as God's children. When Jesus said, "Peace be with you!" that meant everything to the disciples, and it means everything to us, too. The disciples had been through a lot already and they would still have to go through a lot more. And life in this sinful world isn't getting any easier for Christians nowadays, either. All across the world people still hate us and want to kill us, but no matter what happens to us now, Jesus gives us real peace to get through it, because even if we have to lose our lives for our faith, we know that eternal life in heaven is waiting for us afterwards.

But maybe you're more like Jesus' disciple Thomas, the doubter. You're skeptical about Jesus and everything he did, because you can't see it for yourself and you've never seen anything like it. Seeing is believing, that's what society tells you. If it can't be proven in a laboratory, then it can't be real and it can't be true. Unless you see Jesus with your own eyes, there'll always be at least a kernel of doubt in your mind that any of these stories should really be taken seriously.

But listen to what the apostle John recorded just for you to hear: "*A week later [Jesus'] disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'* Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'" And then he adds this for your sake, too: "*These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*"

You know, Thomas wasn't so different from any of us. He had the same doubts and the same struggles. And God made sure that this story about Thomas was recorded in his Word for exactly that reason, so we can learn from his failure. Lots of times we *are* Thomas. We tend to trust our own

senses and experiences above anything else. But also like Thomas, God overcomes those doubts in us because he gives us something that we can trust beyond a shadow of a doubt. Thomas didn't want to believe unless he could see and touch the risen Christ himself. So then Jesus appeared to prove that he really was alive and that he really had defeated sin and death and the devil. Thomas could have an unshakable trust in Jesus because he saw him with his own eyes and touched him with his own hands. And we can have that same unshakable trust in Jesus, because we have that same eye-witness personal testimony recorded for us in God's perfect, holy, infallible Word.

See, that's what Jesus meant when he said to Thomas, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" He's talking about us. We haven't seen Jesus with our own eyes, but we do have God's trustworthy Word, and that's more than good enough, because that tells us everything we need about what Jesus did for us to give us salvation and spiritual peace. So don't let society tell you that the Bible's nothing but old myths and worn-out fairytales. That's just not true, and it's just the devil trying to undercut your faith and threaten you spiritually just like he threatened the disciples physically. No, Jesus' greeting, "Peace be with you!" is just as powerful, just as effective, just as applicable today as it was the day Jesus said it, because it rests on the sure foundation of God's Word, which is so much more reliable than any of our own fading and failing senses, and which comes from a much more trustworthy Source.

You know, in Old Testament times it was common for Jews to greet each other just like Jesus did here by saying *Shalom aleikhem*, peace be with you. You see, that word "shalom" basically means peace, but really it means a deep-down peace in every aspect of one's existence that nothing in this world can possibly touch or diminish. It means total wholeness in your life and harmony with God, where everything is exactly as it's meant to be – physically, relationally, and most of all spiritually. Well, that's the kind of peace that Jesus gives to us through his resurrection, and that's the kind of peace that he brings to our hearts and lives through his Word. Because of what Jesus has done for us, Christians have real peace for every situation and every facet of their lives – that was true for the disciples, it's true for us too, and it makes all the difference in the world. So people of God, take these words to heart: Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.