

Peace Be With You
Associate Pastor Adam M. L. Tice
April 15, 2012

John 20:19-31

“Peace be with you.”

I love the versatility of that phrase. What exactly does Jesus mean? It is, “Hey, calm down, I’m here.” Or is it “Be at peace with one another.” Or “Your way of being is to be peace,” or “Wherever you are, peace shall be.”

Perhaps all of the above — it is a naming, a calling and a blessing. And I’m inclined to see the last one — peace as a commission for the disciples — as most important given what happens next. Jesus breathes on them and they receive the Holy Spirit, and they are commissioned to go and forgive. “Peace be with you” is an ongoing action, not a singular instruction. It is their new way of life.

Peace, in this story, means resurrection. Because Jesus rose, “Peace be with you.” Because creation’s rebirth is now underway, “peace be with you.” Because the disciples learned to see the world in a new light, “peace be with you.”

For the writer of the fourth gospel, resurrection was no metaphor, nor was it simply a spiritual reality. In fact, the writer goes to great lengths to refute those types of claims. The Gospel of Thomas, a collection of Jesus’ sayings that didn’t make it into the Biblical canon, offers a Gnostic interpretation of Jesus. In that book, Jesus was really Spirit and came to teach a secret spiritual reality to his followers. Bodies and flesh could be transcended by participation in this spiritual reality. But in the gospel named for John, the flesh and body of Jesus is essential — and in what might be a rather pointed rhetorical move, we see Thomas in a visceral encounter with Jesus’ body. The writer of

John appears to be offering a direct critique to the Gnostic community of Thomas. Resurrection is not simply a spiritual matter — it encompasses the whole of our humanity, body and spirit. All that made Jesus human was still present, even his scars — and these are now part of his divine humanity forever. So when Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” it is not just a spiritually abstract blessing meant to calm down his friends. Peace is resurrection; peace is body and spirit; peace is a broken body redeemed and risen.

I think that if you read from the gospels and find yourself identifying with Jesus, you’re probably doing it wrong. But when this passage was assigned for the Sunday that I offer you my final words and blessings, I could not help but put myself in Jesus’ sandals. This passage has popped up at several important times in my life. It was the text for one of my very first sermons, as a guest at Pleasant Oaks Mennonite in Indiana. It was the text for my seminary graduation. I have a couple of hymns that come from this passage. And the last time I preached on it was the only other time I preached in this building,¹ a number of years ago.

So this is my blessing: “Peace be with you.”

You are in transition — strangers in a strange sanctuary, awaiting the resurrection of your church building. “Peace be with you.”

You are awaiting a hoped-for amicable resolution in your relationship to the conference. “Peace be with you.”

1 University Park Church of the Brethren

You are moving beyond being a small congregation where everyone knows everyone, to being a growing, dynamic body including new and unfamiliar faces. “Peace be with you.”

You are seeking a replacement for an incredibly talented and ruggedly handsome associate pastor. “Peace be with you.”

You are skeptics and seekers, but you take the central narrative of your shared faith seriously. “Peace be with you.”

You are inclusive and welcoming, but at the same time, it is a meaningful commitment to become a part of this body. “Peace be with you.”

You utilize the gifts and energy of all who offer them, but you also value quality and recognize that integrity in worship and service requires effort. “Peace be with you.”

You know how to disagree with one another, but you also know how to find and build consensus. “Peace be with you.”

You have not only been a job for me, you have been a home. You have offered me space and support as I have grown as a pastor. You have given me friendship and food. We have made beautiful music together. You have received my words and have offered a few back to me. You have trusted me to speak for you. You have allowed me to teach your children. You have invited me into your lives. You have made me and my family a part of you. You have been “Peace” for me and with me. And so I commission you to embody Jesus’ resurrection. I ask that the Holy Spirit breathe upon you. I name you, I call you and I bless you: my church, my beloved people, peace be with you.