

SHALOM

SHERARD EDINGTON

John 20:19-31

For us, as a congregation, the first casualty of the coronavirus pandemic was the Passing of the Peace. You remember, that point in the worship service where we stopped everything and turned to those around us to shake hands and give hugs and greet one another with the words, “The peace of Christ be with you,” and respond to this greeting with “And also with you.”

In some churches, the Passing of the Peace is a formal affair with worshipers cautiously extending their hands to people they’ve seen for twenty years but have never really met. But not here. In this church, the Passing of the Peace is more like the seventh-inning stretch meets a cattle stampede—everyone is up and moving around, children race through the room greeting their adult friends. It is wonderful, organized chaos, and I, as pastor, always feel guilty when I have to request that everyone sit down and listen to the scripture passage.

Back in 1989, while I was a seminary student, I took an internship with a church in Scotland. The Scots are wonderful people, but they are not known for their outward displays of affection. It’s a point of pride for them. I remember how one woman in the congregation was telling me about her recent visit to America and how she had attended church services here, and everyone wanted to hug her. She wasn’t used to that. I told her, “Yes, that’s what we do.”

It seems like forever, but back in February, we were just beginning to understand that a tsunami of infection was heading toward our shores. Slowly, as a church, we began to make contingency plans. At a meeting of the Worship Committee in early March, still naive about the coming pandemic, my initial recommendation was that we alter our practice of Passing the Peace, that we eliminate personal contact.

On March 5, in my email to the congregation, I suggested that instead of the traditional handshake, that we choose to instead bow to one another.

On March 8th, that is what we did. It was it was amusing, and we were all very self-conscious about looking silly as we bowed. We missed the personal contact. The best part—and this made it worthwhile—was that a trio of our young ladies—Quinn, Maggie, and Violet—bounced through sanctuary together offering choreographed curtsies. It was adorable. That was March 8 and we figured this was as bad as it would get. It wasn’t. The next week, we abruptly cancelled all services.

Then, after regrouping, on March 22nd, like most of the rest of the country, we started holding our worship online as we are doing now. That has been just seven weeks.

The Passing of the Peace is a ritual that goes back to at least the second century when it was known as the Kiss of Peace. (My Scottish friend would really have loved that.) The roots for this practice can be found in several of Paul's letters where he encourages the people to *Greet one another with a holy kiss* (Romans 16:16).

The Kiss of Peace was a literal kiss between members of the congregation. It was only intended to be between people of the same gender, but we know from historical documents that this rule was not always adhered to. Women and men kissing in church was something of an issue—sometimes even a scandal. Then they figured out that the Kiss of Peace needed to be suspended on the Sundays leading up to Easter so as not to be confused with the kiss of Judas—not the kiss of peace.

Given the complications of the Kiss of Peace, in the Middle Ages, the kissing of people was replaced with the kissing of the Pax Board. The Pax Board (*pax* is Latin for peace) started out as a wooded plaque or plate. It may have had a handle attached. The Pax Board would be kissed by the head priest, handed to other clergy who would kiss it, and then passed to the congregation to be kissed by each of them. In Germany, the Pax Board was called the *kusstafel*—the kiss-board. But in time, the kiss board fell out of favor and was replaced with a simple handshake.¹

The ritual of Passing the Peace has its roots in scripture. In the Gospel of John, in chapter 14, Jesus says, *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you* (John 14:27). This peace returns in our reading for today.

Our reading from chapter 20 of John's gospel offers us another of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus that we have been exploring in this season of Easter. Two weeks ago, we looked at Jesus' appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus. Last week we considered Jesus' appearance to the two men on the road to Emmaus.

Our reading for today takes place in Jerusalem on that first Easter Sunday. It is evening of that day and the disciples and other followers of Jesus are gathered in a house. The doors of the house are locked because the disciples are afraid of being arrested by the authorities for being associates of Jesus. Three days earlier, Jesus had been executed. And then today, they learned that his body had been taken from the tomb. The disciples feel hunted and have locked themselves in this house.

As they are gathered, contemplating their future and their fate, Jesus appears among them. How did he enter this locked room? We don't know. But he stands

¹ <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/peace>
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_\(liturgical_object\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_(liturgical_object))

there with them and proclaims, *Peace be with you*, and then he shows everyone the wounds in his hands and his side as evidence of who he is. The disciples rejoice when they realize that this is Jesus.

Jesus repeats his words *Peace be with you*, adding, *As the father has sent me, so I send you*. And then he breathes on them saying, *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*.

So, to review, Jesus appears and offers a blessing of peace. Then he commissions his followers telling them that as God has sent him, so he sends them. Then he confers on them the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins.

Not all the disciples were present that day for Jesus' appearance. One of them, Thomas, was absent for this event. When Thomas returns to the house, the others inform him that they *have seen the Lord*. Thomas doesn't believe them. Unless he can put his fingers in Jesus' wounds, he's not buying it.

A week later, the scene is the same—the disciples are still paralyzed in their locked room—except that Thomas is also present. Once again, Jesus appears proclaiming, *Peace be with you*. He turns to Thomas and says, *Put your finger here and see my hands... Do not doubt but believe*. Thomas looks at Jesus and confesses, *My Lord and my God*.

We are all familiar with this passage. We know it as the story of Doubting Thomas. That is how this disciple has become known to us—the one who doubted Jesus. But Thomas didn't doubt Jesus; he doubted the other disciples. They said, *We have seen the Lord*, and Thomas told them he needed evidence. He didn't question Jesus' ability to be there; he just wasn't taking the word of the others. And why should he? They doubted as well. When Jesus appeared to them, they didn't believe until they saw his wounds.

Of all the disciples, Thomas has the strongest track record for faith. Earlier in this gospel, when Jesus wants to go see his dying friend Lazarus, the disciples try to talk him out of it because the authorities are looking to capture him. Thomas, alone, says, *Let us go also that we may die with him* (John 11:16).

When Jesus does appear to Thomas, Jesus invites him to touch the wounds. But all Thomas does is confess, *My Lord and my God*. He doesn't need proof; he just needs Christ.

Normally, when sermonizing on this passage, I would talk about how, like the disciples, we live in fear and how this fear keeps us locked in metaphorical spaces. But not today. Today we fear; we fear a virus and it has us locked—literally—in our homes and away from our church. But even in the grips of paralyzing fear, Christ is

not locked out. Jesus comes to the disciples at their darkest hour offering them his peace—*Peace be with you*.

This word peace is the translation of the Greek word εἰρήνη. The Greek word, in turn, is a translation of the Hebrew word that was certainly spoken by Jesus. That Hebrew word, of course, is **shalom**. In Hebrew, shalom is layered with meaning. Shalom means peace and wholeness. It means wellness and balance. It is yin and yang. One who has shalom is in balance with the world and with God. Jesus saying *Peace be with you* is not a casual greeting; it is a powerful blessing. The risen, resurrected Christ is imparting salvation upon those locked in that house. He is the one that the prophet Isaiah foretold—*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6).

When the disciples do recognize Jesus, he commissions them to go into the world; he empowers them with the Holy Spirit. There is more than a hint of creation here—the Christ bringing order to chaos and breathing God's divine spirit. The scene in the room is an echo of Genesis—*In the beginning... the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*. God's spirit blessed the creation of the world. Those in the locked room are renewed with shalom and sent out from their chaos and their darkness empowered with the Holy Spirit to change lives.

As we hide in our (very real) locked rooms, we don't need to wait for Christ to deliver the Holy Spirit to us like it's a package coming from Amazon. We have it. Christ went to the disciples and sent them out. They touched others with faith, and those touched more, and so on until it reached us. We have the blessing. We have the Spirit. Christ is with us.

Locked in our rooms, it is tempting to be a Thomas and demand evidence for Jesus' presence. But we don't need evidence; we have the word of those who have gone before. If you fear that Jesus has forgotten you, don't. Remember, he came back for Thomas. Every sheep is important. You are important.

I miss the Passing of the Peace, of seeing each of you, and holding your hand for a moment. The Peace is not a perfunctory handshake; it is a powerful blessing. Each week, it renews my spirit and reminds me that God is with us. For me personally, the power of the Peace is that it comes from all of you. When my faith falls out of alignment, the Peace nudges it back into place. When my spirit is weak, the Peace re-charges my battery. When my soul feels broken, the Peace patches it up. When I feel trapped in darkness, the Peace brings light. The Peace is God's covenant with us. It is the catalyst of our salvation.

We are living in challenging times and will need to create new ways to Pass the Peace of Christ with one another. And when we are finally able to return to worship together physically, it still may be a while before we resume hugs and handshakes.

(And we are most definitely not passing the kiss board.) What I can assure you is that no matter how we practice it, Christ is with us and his Peace is with us.

I know that Michael already led us in the Peace, but I want to do it again. I'm going to start it and ask that you respond. And then, because you are not just recipients of the Peace but givers of it as well that you offer it back to me and to all of us.

“The Peace of Christ be with you. And also with you.”