

The Perspective of Easter

John 20:19-23

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 23, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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.' (John 20:19-23, NRSV)

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It's Sunday evening, the third day after Jesus was crucified and buried. His closest friends, the disciples, are huddled together, hiding behind locked doors. They are afraid. They are ashamed. They are confused. They have no idea what tomorrow will bring.

As best as you can, try and see things from their perspective. Three years earlier these men left everything to follow Jesus. After hearing him teach with unmatched authority and witnessing the miraculous signs he performed, the likes of which they had never seen before, they each left everything to follow this man. They bet the farm that Jesus was the Messiah, convinced that he was the one who would deliver them.

But now they believed all their hopes and dreams lay dead in a nearby tomb. How could Jesus have allowed this to happen? He let himself be arrested. He walked right into it! He let himself be beaten. He let himself be nailed to the cross. And we didn't do a thing to try and stop it from happening. He was our master. We were his friends. Yet we deserted him in his hour of greatest need. Some of us even denied that we'd ever known him. And now he's gone. What's worse, the people who killed him are probably coming after us next.

But this morning some of the women came back with this wild story that Jesus is alive again. They said they went to his grave and found it empty. Then they claimed they saw him with their own eyes. They said he wanted to come and meet with us. What could this mean? Could this be true? And if it is, after all that has happened, how can we possibly face Jesus now? He told

us this would happen and we didn't believe him. If he really is alive, what must he think of us now?

Can you grasp even a hint of the fear, the shame, the guilt, the confusion that must have overwhelmed these men as they hid together locked up in that house?

Now trade places. If you can, imagine the same scene from Jesus' perspective. Remember that all along Jesus knew he would suffer and die. All along, Jesus knew his best friends would desert him. From the day he asked them to follow him, Jesus knew these men would ultimately fail him. But Jesus also knew all along that neither death nor failure would have the last word. All along he knew that life would triumph in the end. He knew he would rise again. None of this came as a surprise to Jesus. All of it was according to plan.

What this means is that Jesus has long anticipated this moment, this moment when he comes to meet his friends and share with them such unbelievably good news, knowing that as soon as they hear it and see that it is true it will literally change everything.

How much fun must it have been that day to be Jesus?

I've told you before the story of friend of mine who lost the diamond out of her engagement ring only months after it was given to her by her fiancé. She was a teacher at the time and was out on the playground for yard duty one morning at recess when she happened to look down and notice that the diamond had at some point fallen out of its setting. She knew it had been there earlier. She also knew that somewhere on this huge expanse of asphalt and gravel was this precious gift that her future husband had given her to wear for the rest of her life.

As you can imagine, she was crushed. Realistically, she knew the diamond was gone for good. This tiny stone would never be found among the literally thousands and thousands of pebbles on that playground. As the tears began to flow she knew that searching for it was an exercise in futility.

It was a fellow teacher, however, who, likely not knowing what else to say, convinced her that there was no harm in looking. And so after school that day, dozens of teachers and children from the school fanned out across the acres of that school playground searching

for a needle in a haystack. I can't imagine many of them had much hope for success.

But wouldn't you know it, it just so happened that the sun that afternoon was shining at just at the right angle at just the right moment so that as one of the teachers walked past one particular patch of asphalt she noticed, out of the corner of her eye, just enough of a twinkle to cause her to go over and investigate and reach down and, to her surprise, pick up the lost diamond.

Now, at that point there was this moment. At that particular moment in time my friend is one side of the playground, devastated because she believes her diamond is lost for good. At that same moment, however, this other teacher is on the other side of the playground ecstatic because she knows the lost diamond is found. At the very same moment one person is filled with sorrow while the other person is filled with joy. Why? Because they each are looking at the very same reality but from a completely different perspective.

Can you imagine how much fun it must have been for that teacher to run across the playground to my friend and open up her hand and show her the lost diamond? Imagine the joy!

Can you imagine the joy a doctor must feel as she goes to tell her patient that the test results have indicated that the tumor, which was once thought to be untreatable and deadly, has miraculously and completely vanished?

Can you imagine the joy a police officer must feel as he calls the parents of a child once thought to be lost and given up for dead, but who has now, after all this time, been found alive and well?

Imagine the joy Jesus must feel as he suddenly appears and stands among his friends in that room hung so heavy with fear, and shame, and guilt, and despair, and regret. Jesus just appears in the middle of it all and says to them – the *first words* he says to them – “Peace be with you.” Jesus comes and before he does anything else he offers them peace.

The word he likely spoke to them was *shalom*. It's a Hebrew word that carries with it deep meaning. Shalom is a peace that is much more than simply the absence of conflict or noise. Shalom is that place in life where everything has been made right again. Shalom comes when every longing has been satisfied, when every wrong has been righted and forgotten, when every fear has been put to rest.

One writer translates Jesus' greeting here this way: “May God give you every good thing.”¹ I like that, because in that moment the reality these men imagine is marked by fear and shame and regret. But now Jesus is telling them that there is a different reality, a true reality they do not yet see. In reality, God has given them every good thing. Because of what Christ has done, they now have God's love, God's forgiveness, God's favor, God's blessing. In other words, peace truly is with them.

This is what Jesus is telling them but I'm not convinced that they believe him at first. It's too good to be true. How could it be true? Somebody found my diamond? That's not possible. I won't believe it till I see it. You're telling me the tumor is completely gone? That can't be right. Show me the scans. My child has been found, alive! I refuse to believe it until I'm holding her in my arms.

I think Jesus sees the doubt and hesitation on the faces of his friends. That's why he immediately shows them his hands and his side. He knows they need evidence. They need to see the nail marks and the wound left by the spear to know he is not a ghost, or a dream, or worse. He really is alive. He really is standing there with them. He really has risen from the dead to set things right. He really is offering them peace.

I love that Jesus always gives us whatever it is we need to believe. If we are *willing* to believe – and that's the key – Jesus will give us whatever it is we *need* to believe. Seek and you will find, Jesus once said. Ask and you will receive. Knock and the door will be opened to you.²

I say this because even though we're all sitting in church during Easter season, I know that there are some of us here who have a hard time believing this story. At times in my own life, I have struggled to believe this story.

It's harder for us, actually, than it was for the disciples. We face the same things in life that they faced – guilt, and regret, and shame, and confusion, doubt, and fear. Unlike them, however, we don't have the benefit of having the Risen Jesus show up in the flesh and stand among us. We don't have the advantage of examining the scars in his hands for ourselves.

Of course, we have the witness of the scriptures, which is a lot. We have the testimony of others, which also helps a great deal. And of course we have the Holy

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: John*, Volume II, (Philadelphia: Westminster, c. 1975), p. 272.

² Matthew 7:7.

Spirit working in our hearts to open us to the truth. In other words, we have more than enough. And yet, it can still be so very difficult to believe. Jesus, however, will give you whatever it is you need to have faith.

Of course, if you're not willing to believe, I don't think Jesus will waste his time. I don't know how else to say it. God doesn't force people into faith who don't want to have faith in the first place. However, I'm convinced that the person who seeks after the truth, open to the possibility that Christ may have, in fact, risen from the dead, I'm convinced that person will eventually come to see that he actually did.

That's what happens here. In spite of all their doubts, the disciples are open to believing and so when Jesus shows them the scars in his hands and the wound in his side, they believe. They believe, and they rejoice. They rejoice the moment they realize that they are, in fact, looking at their Lord risen from the dead. All at once, in a moment, the perspective of these men changes to one of unshakable joy.

You see, the disciples were given palpable, empirical, physical evidence that Jesus of Nazareth, who really was dead a few days earlier, now really was alive. Not just spiritually alive, or mythically alive, but physically alive, historically alive. Jesus really did die. But three days later he really did rise from the dead. That meant that this man who claimed to be the Messiah, claimed to be God himself, had backed up his claims by doing what only God could do. He overcame death.

2000 years later we are faced with the same claim and we must decide whether this claim is true or false, authentic or implausible. It is a vitally crucial decision. For as somebody once said, "If the resurrection of Jesus actually happened, then nothing else really matters. If the resurrection of Jesus *did not* actually happen, then nothing else really matters."³ All hope, all life, all possibility of things ever being made right again, the possibility of shalom itself, rests on the truth of this claim.

This is why the disciples are ecstatic out of their minds when they realize the truth. Just like my friend's despair vanished the instant she looked down at the hands of her fellow teacher and saw there her once lost diamond, in the same way all sorrow and trouble that weighed so heavy on these men also vanished the instant they looked down at Jesus' hands and, seeing the scars there, realized that death truly had been defeated,

which meant that Jesus truly was God. And when the God who has conquered death comes offering you peace, what else can you do but rejoice.

Many of you here today already know the deep joy that is yours when you come to believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead to come and offer you peace. For you, everything in life has changed. *Everything.*

Some of us, however, do not yet live from that perspective of joy. But we can. You carry around with you fear, and disappointment, and shame, and doubt, and pain. And the weight, at times, can be crushing. But if you seek after him, Jesus will show up right in the middle of your life one day, perhaps when you least expect it, and when he does his first words to you will not be words of judgment, or anger, or condemnation, or disappointment. Jesus' first words to you will be, "Peace. Peace be with you. Peace, because everything has been set right or is about to be set right. Peace, because God is ready to give you every good thing."

From the moment we trust Christ, everything changes. It's not that hardship and grief completely disappear all at once. They don't. Christians face sadness and trouble just like everybody else. Sometimes more so. The difference is that trouble and hardship do not defeat us because we know they themselves have already been defeated. We know that the darkness, though it still lingers, is fading fast all around as the dawn approaches. And before long, the darkness will vanish completely.

One of the early Christian leaders, a man named Paul, once put it this way. I love this passage. In the New Testament letter of II Corinthians he wrote,

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.⁴

Paul was a man who, even after he became a Christian, faced tremendous pain and trouble in his life. In fact, he was ultimately imprisoned and executed for his faith. And yet, Paul calls *all the trouble of life* a "slight momentary affliction" which he considers nothing in light of the "eternal weight of glory beyond all measure", a glory he knows God has in store for him.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, cited by Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, c. 2012), p. 1163. Italics mine.

⁴ II Corinthians 4:16-18 (NRSV).

You see, Paul has the perspective of the woman who holds the diamond in her hand which she knows will, in short order, end the despair of her friend. He has the perspective of the doctor on her way to tell her patient that the disease which has sapped his will to live has vanished. He has the perspective of Jesus going to meet his devastated friends to show them that he is not dead, but has risen from the grave.

This is Paul's perspective, and it is the perspective of joy, the perspective of Easter! If only we could come to see life from that perspective.

I once heard the story of a five-year-old child who, at one point, became very sick. She got so sick, in fact, that her parents, who of course loved their little girl dearly, were afraid they might lose her. Things looked so bleak, they were preparing for the worst.

After running some tests, however, the doctors determined that while their daughter did need an operation, it was, in fact, a very simple procedure which was almost completely risk-free. Their daughter, in other words, was going to be fine. Not only would she live, she would make a full recovery.

Can you imagine the joy of those parents on hearing this news? Their joy knew no limits.

The five-year-old little girl, however, was still scared to death. She dreaded the operation. She was frightened of the hospital, and of the surgeon, and of the pain that she felt inside. And as much as her parents tried to reassure her that it all would be fine, she just couldn't understand. As much as they tried, they could not get her to see things from their perspective.⁵

There is that moment again. Can you see it now? That moment when one person is overwhelmed by sorrow and fear, and another person, *at the very same moment*, is overwhelmed by joy and delight. If only the one overwhelmed by sorrow could see things from the perspective of the one overwhelmed by joy.

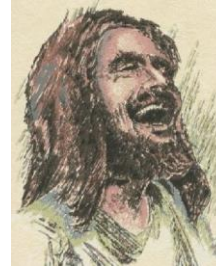
I imagine that at times your life, like my life, must feel weighed down by sorrow and trouble, guilt and shame, doubt and despair. And yet, the message of the Christian Gospel, the message of Easter, is that Jesus is alive, and in our midst, and wanting us to see life, to see reality, from his perspective.

A theologian named G.K. Chesterton once pointed out that most people in this world have been forced to be

happy about little things, but sad about the big ones. But that is not how we were meant to live. Instead, he insisted, we are more ourselves when joy is the fundamental thing about us, and grief the superficial.

In his words, "Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labor by which all things live."⁶

Have you ever seen this image of Jesus? When I was a kid one of the pastors of our church had this image hanging in his office. The first time I saw it I was startled. This was certainly not how I pictured Jesus. That wasn't my perspective.



Thankfully, my perspective is changing. I love this image of Jesus because even though we live in a world heavy with fear and despair, this image reminds me that the Risen Christ has appeared in our midst, is among us holding out his scarred hands for us see, is hoping we will see that he has overcome everything, and in the joy of it all is finding himself barely able to contain his laughter. As this picture suggests, maybe he's not even trying to contain it anymore.

As he once said to his disciples, Jesus now says to us, "I have told you all these things so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."⁷ May that be true of us. May we live every day from the perspective of Easter!

Amen.



The Next Step A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read John 20:19-23. As you picture this whole scene in your mind, what stands out for you?
2. Why did Jesus show his hands and side to his disciples? Shouldn't his very presence have been enough to convince them?

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, c. 1908), p. 166. The paragraph before this is my paraphrase from his writings in this same place.

⁷ John 15:11 (NRSV).

⁵ Adapted by an illustration from John Ortberg in *Faith and Doubt*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, c. 2008), p. 164.

3. Are you convinced of the reality of the Risen Christ, that Jesus truly is alive today? If so, what has convinced you? If not, what would it take to convince you?
4. Imagine you meet Jesus face to face today and the first words he says to you are, "Peace be with you?" What would that mean for you?
5. Read John 20:24-29. Don't you think Jesus would be frustrated with Thomas for not believing the testimony of his friends? And yet, Jesus doesn't seem to be upset. Why?
6. Read Paul's words again in II Corinthians 4:16-18. Do you live with this perspective that all the troubles of your life are merely "slight momentary affliction" in light of a coming "eternal weight of glory beyond all measure"? Are you able to live daily with this level of joy?
7. Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan is the one who said, "If the resurrection of Jesus actually happened, then nothing else really matters. If the resurrection of Jesus did not actually happen, then nothing else really matters." What do you think he means? Do you agree?
8. What is one way this Easter message has changed your perspective? What are you going to do about it?

Table to Table Question
*A question for kids and adults to
answer together*

How are things different in our world
because Jesus rose from the dead and is
alive?