

John 20:19–23
“Announcing Peace”

Introduction

We know that on that original resurrection Sunday, when evening came, the disciples were all gathered together in one place for the second time that day. In the morning, they had heard two separate reports, one from Mary Magdalene and one from Mary the mother of James, and Salome, and Joanna and the other women who were with them, testifying not only to having seen and heard from angels, but even to having seen and heard from the risen Jesus. John and Peter had also been to the empty tomb, but they hadn't seen any angels and they had not seen Jesus. Whatever John and Peter may have thought of the women's report, it seemed to the rest of the disciples to be nonsense and they didn't believe them. At least some of the group—if not the whole group—had dispersed, but now they had come back together again because now Jesus had also appeared to Peter. Now there were three independent testimonies to an appearance of the risen Jesus. And then, while they were discussing these things, Cleopas and his companion, who had left the group of disciples to travel to Emmaus in the early afternoon, returned with the news that Jesus had appeared to them, too, and that He had revealed Himself to them in the breaking of bread.

The disciples now believe that Jesus has been resurrected (at least in theory), but they don't yet fully understand what it means. The report from Mary would have given them much to think about. Jesus had told her:

- John 20:17 — “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brothers and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”

And the report from Cleopas and his companion would also have given them much to think about. Jesus had said to them:

- Luke 24:25–27 — “O foolish ones and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He interpreted to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

But the disciples cannot grasp things fully in a single day. For the next forty days, in fact, Jesus will appear to the disciples at various times and speak to them about the things concerning the kingdom of God, and even then they won't understand in the fullest sense until the Holy Spirit is given at Pentecost (Acts 1:1-8). It's with this context that we pick up again in verse 19 of John chapter twenty:

I. John 20:19 — So while it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and while the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

The disciples may believe that Jesus is risen, but because they can't yet understand what this means they're still afraid. It was while they were gathered fearfully in secret, John says, behind closed doors, that Jesus came and stood in their midst.

The obvious implication is that Jesus didn't come in the "normal" way by knocking on the door and being let in; instead, He came in some other wondrous way and was suddenly standing there in their midst. This is the obvious implication, but John never spells it out. One mark of the authenticity of the Gospel writer's testimony is how reserved they are when it comes to mysteries like these. Luke tells us that the disciples were "startled and frightened... thinking that they were seeing a spirit" (Lk. 24:37), but John never mentions this new fear. John emphasizes only what Luke does not—the disciples' fear of the Jews and the fact that they were meeting in secret behind closed doors. What John emphasizes is the disciples' fear of the enemies of Jesus and of their authority and power to arrest and imprison and even put to death those who had followed Jesus. We can easily imagine this fear, can't we? Maybe, at some level, we can even identify with this kind of fear. But John emphasizes this fear only so that we will grasp more fully—and love more fully—the greeting of Jesus. "Jesus came and stood in their midst [in the midst of the disciples meeting behind closed doors for fear of the Jews] and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" Never were any words more full of significance than these words spoken at this moment by this Jesus, now resurrected from the dead.

"Peace be with you." At one level, this was simply the common Jewish greeting (cf. 1 Chron. 12:18).

- Judges 19:20 — Then the old man said [to the travelling Levite], "**Peace be to you.** Only let me take care of all that you lack; however, do not spend the night in the open square."
- 1 Samuel 25:6 — "Thus you shall say [to Nabal], 'Have a long life; **peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have.**'"

Spoken by the pious and God-fearing Jew, these words expressed a desire that the one to whom they were addressed would experience the true *well-being* of God's covenantal blessing and favor poured out upon him (cf. Lk. 10:5-6; 1 Pet. 5:14; 3 Jn. 15; cf. the opening greeting in almost all of the NT epistles). But sometimes this greeting was used not just by the God-fearing Jew, but by angels and even by Yahweh Himself.

- Daniel 10:19 — And [the angel] said [to Daniel], "O man of high esteem, do not be afraid. **Peace be with you;** gather strength and be strong!"
- Judges 6:23 — And Yahweh said to [Gideon], "**Peace to you.** Do not fear; you shall not die."

The difference here is that this greeting is no longer simply a wish; now it's an announcement—now it's a proclamation of good news. God comes to Daniel and to Gideon not with death and judgement, but with blessing and salvation: "*Peace* be with you"; "*Peace* to you."

So what does it mean, now, when the risen Jesus—when Christ, the Messiah—comes and stands in the midst of the disciples who are meeting behind closed doors for fear of the Jews and says to

them, ‘Peace be with you’”? This is no generic greeting. Neither is Jesus expressing simply a wish and a prayer. Instead, this is an announcement; this is the proclamation of good news. For the Jew, “*shalom*” (“peace”) was a beautiful word; it was a word that summed up the true well-being and wholeness of the righteous who experienced God’s salvation — salvation not just “negatively” in terms of deliverance from danger or *from* one’s enemies but also “positively” in terms of the pouring out of God’s covenantal blessing and favor. So we can think first of all of the priestly blessing in Numbers chapter six:

- Numbers 6:22–27 — “Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: Yahweh bless you, and keep you; Yahweh make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; Yahweh lift up His face on you, and give you **peace**.”

Peace is an all-encompassing word. It’s a word that sums up not primarily a subjective feeling, but rather the whole objective possession of God’s salvation. It’s an objective condition of wholeness and well-being and blessing and abundance. So the Psalmist writes in Psalm 29:

- Psalm 29:10–11 — Yahweh sat enthroned over the flood; indeed, Yahweh sits as King forever. Yahweh will give *strength* to His people; Yahweh will bless His people with *peace*.

And then in Psalm chapter 37:

- Psalm 37:10–11 — Yet a little while and the *wicked* man will be no more; you will look carefully at his place, and he will not be there. But the *lowly* will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant peace.

We’re reminded in these verses that God’s salvation and God’s peace come only to the righteous.

- Isaiah 48:22 (cf. 57:21; Ps. 85:8-10; Jer. 12:12; 16:5) — “There is no peace for the wicked,” says Yahweh.

If “peace” is a word summing up the whole objective possession of God’s *salvation*, then we should be able to see how this peace ultimately *depends* upon the progressive unfolding of God’s *salvation* in history. The sporadic, on-again/off-again “peace” of God’s Old Covenant people, Israel (cf. Ps. 122:6-9; Jer. 6:14; 8:11; 14:19; Ezek. 13:10, 16), was only a type and a shadow of that true eschatological peace that awaited God’s people under the New Covenant — a permanent and everlasting peace accompanying the arrival of God’s eschatological salvation and the creation of a truly righteous and obedient people. To put it another way: The ushering in of the fullness of God’s salvation through the Messiah (eschatological salvation) would mean the ushering in of the fullness of God’s peace (eschatological peace) for a truly righteous and obedient covenant people. So we read in the prophet Isaiah:

- Isaiah 9:6–7 (cf. Ps. 72:1-4, 7-8; Ezek. 34:25-31; 37:24-28) — For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of **Peace**. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of **peace**, on the throne of David and over his

kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with *justice* and *righteousness* from then on and forevermore.

In another place, Isaiah speaks of the judgment that God's disobedient Old Covenant people would experience:

- Isaiah 32:15–18 — Until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful orchard, and the fruitful orchard is counted as a forest. Then *justice* will dwell in the wilderness, and *righteousness* will live in the fruitful orchard. And the work of *righteousness* will be **peace**, and the service of *righteousness*, quietness and security forever. Then my people will live in a habitation of **peace**, and in secure dwellings and in undisturbed resting places.
- Isaiah 55:12 — “For you will go out with gladness and be led forth with **peace**; the mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
- Isaiah 60:17 — “Instead of bronze I will bring gold, and instead of iron I will bring silver, and instead of wood, bronze, and instead of stones, iron. and I will make **peace** your overseers and *righteousness* your taskmasters.”
- Isaiah 66:12 — For thus says Yahweh, “Behold, I stretch out **peace** to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream.”

Can you see how the coming of God's eschatological salvation through the promised Messiah was to mark the coming of God's everlasting eschatological peace for a truly righteous and obedient people? But it wasn't as though we could ever earn this peace by our own self-righteousness. This righteous people would, itself, be the sovereign creation of God's saving power. So we read first in the prophet Isaiah, and then in the prophet Jeremiah:

- Isaiah 57:17–20 (cf. Eph. 2:17) — “Because of the iniquity of his greedy gain I was angry and struck him; I hid My face and was angry, and he went on turning away, in the way of his heart. I have seen his ways, but ***I will heal him***; I will lead him and pay him and his mourners in full with comfort, ***creating the praise of the lips***. **Peace, peace** to him who is far and to him who is near,” says Yahweh, “and ***I will heal him***.”
- Jeremiah 33:6–9 (cf. Hag. 2:6–9) — Behold, ***I will bring to [Jerusalem] health and healing***, and ***I will heal them***; and I will reveal to them an abundance of **peace** and truth. I will return the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first. And ***I will cleanse them from all their iniquity*** by which they have sinned against Me, and ***I will pardon all their iniquities*** by which they have sinned against Me and by which they have transgressed against Me. And it will be to Me a name of joy, praise, and beauty before all the nations of the earth which will hear of all the good that I do for them, and they will be in dread and tremble because of all the good and all the **peace** that I make for it.

In the light of all this, what does it mean when the risen Jesus—when Christ, the Messiah—comes and stands in the midst of the disciples who are meeting behind closed doors for fear of the Jews, and says to them, ‘Peace be with you’”? On the lips of the resurrected Jesus, that’s not just a traditional greeting. Neither is it simply a wish or a prayer. On the lips of the resurrected Jesus, it’s a joyful announcement; it’s a proclamation of the ultimate good news. What “peace” is this? Not primarily a subjective feeling of peace. And not that typological and sporadic peace that God’s people possessed under the Old Covenant. It’s that everlasting eschatological peace that accompanies the arrival of God’s eschatological salvation and is poured out now upon a truly righteous and obedient people. This is the peace that Jesus announces now to His disciples. He’s not saying to them in the first place, “may you feel at peace,” but rather, “Peace is now yours forever and ever.” If death itself has been conquered and the devil himself cast out (Jn. 12:31; 16:11), and if we have now been justified and reconciled to God (Rom. 5:1, 10), and if we have been created anew in righteousness and holiness of the truth (Eph. 4:24), and if we have as our present possession eternal life (Jn. 5:24; 10:28), and if we have all these things through our risen and ascended Savior and King, Jesus Christ, then we have—in the very fullest sense of the word, *PEACE* – ultimate wholeness and well-being.

But the disciples can’t immediately grasp the full import of these words. We remember from Luke’s Gospel that they were initially “startled and frightened... thinking that they were seeing a spirit.” Now added to their fear of the Jews is their fear of a spiritual apparition. So we go on to read in verse 20:

II. John 20:20 — And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord (much like Mary Magdalene; 20:16-17), but did they understand yet? Now that they’re convinced it’s truly Jesus that they see, we read in verse twenty-one:

III. John 20:21a — So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you;

Why does Jesus repeat these words? Because the disciples still haven’t grasped what they really mean — and what the resurrection really means. When Jesus appears to His disciples again the following Sunday, His first words to them will again be these: “Peace be with you” (20:26). Jesus has brought to us that eschatological peace which is the result of that eschatological salvation which we have now in Him. And *because this peace* is now ours, there can be no place left for fear. Here we see the fulfillment of the words that Jesus spoke to His disciples just three days earlier, on the night before His crucifixion:

- John 14:27 — “Peace I leave with you [as I go now to bring in God’s eschatological salvation]; My peace I give to you [as I go now to conquer sin and death and the devil]; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.”
- John 16:33 — “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace [that eschatological peace of life in the kingdom]. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

And so we see that this eschatological peace that we have as our present possession is now the antidote to all turmoil and fear (“do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful”) and the source of a joyful courage and boldness (“take courage; I have overcome the world”). “Peace be with you,” therefore, is first of all a proclamation of good news; but it’s also, secondarily, the foundation and even the whole substance of our mission in and to the world. This is *why* Jesus says: “Peace be with you...”

IV. John 20:21b — “...as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”

Can we see the transformation that this peace is about to work in the disciples? If death itself has been conquered and the devil himself cast out, and if we have now been justified and reconciled to God, and if we have been created anew in righteousness and holiness of the truth, and if we have as our present possession eternal life, and if we have all these things through our risen and ascended Savior and King, Jesus Christ, then what room can there be in our hearts for fear, and how can we not be filled instead with a joyful courage and boldness? It’s because of this peace that Jesus has preached to us (Eph. 2:17)—and in the boldness that this peace imparts to us—that we can now preach the good news of this peace—this eschatological peace—to others. Returning again to Isaiah, we read:

- Isaiah 52:7–10 (cf. Nah. 1:15; Rom. 10:14–15; Eph. 6:15) — How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who proclaims good news, who announces **peace** and proclaims good news of good things, who announces **salvation**, and says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” The voice of Your watchmen! They lift up their voices; they shout joyfully together; for they will see with their own eyes when Yahweh returns to Zion. Break forth, shout joyfully together, you waste places of Jerusalem; for Yahweh has comforted His people; He has redeemed Jerusalem. Yahweh has bared His holy arm in the sight of **all the nations**, that **all the ends of the earth** may see the salvation of our God.

It’s these verses in Isaiah that we see being fulfilled when Jesus announces to the disciples: “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me [to preach to you the good news of this peace], I also send you [to preach to all the nations, and even to all the ends of the earth, the good news of this peace].”

V. John 20:22–23 — And when [Jesus] had said this, He breathed [He exhaled deeply] and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.”

I don’t believe there’s any sense in which the disciples actually received the Holy Spirit at that moment. This is a symbolic foreshadowing of the day of Pentecost, when Jesus will pour out the Holy Spirit upon the disciples (see Carson). Luke gives us Jesus’ own explanation:

- Luke 24:46–49 — He said to [the disciples], “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to **all the nations**, beginning from Jerusalem [cf. ‘Yahweh has bared His holy arm in the sight of **all the nations**’]. You are witnesses of these things. And

behold, *I am sending* the promise of My Father upon you, but you are to stay in the city *until* you are clothed with power from on high.”

If these are the words that Jesus spoke to His disciples when He appeared to them on the day of His resurrection, then listen to the words that He spoke to them forty days later on the day of His ascension:

- Acts 1:8 — You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the **end of the earth** [cf. ‘that all the **ends of the earth** may see the salvation of our God’].”

These verses have a primary application to the Apostles and to the rest of the disciples who were eyewitnesses of these things, but they also have a secondary application to us. Because of that eschatological peace that has been preached to us and that is now our present possession in Christ, we can courageously and without fear preach this same good news of peace to others in and by the power of the Holy Spirit. And the way that we proclaim this peace is simply by proclaiming the forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name. When Jesus says, “if you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them,” He’s speaking of the authority that He has given us to announce to those who repent and believe that their sins *have been* forgiven — not by us, but by God Himself through Jesus Christ. When Jesus says, “If you retain the sins of any, they have been retained,” He’s speaking of the authority that He has given us to warn those who refuse to repent and believe that their sins *are still* reckoned to their account and charged against them — not by us, but by God Himself in His holiness and justice. But it’s important for us to see that this is really just a single message. The announcement of the retaining of sins is only the inevitable flipside of that good news of peace which we proclaim (cf. Jn. 3:16-19; 12:46-48).

Conclusion

“While the doors were shut where the disciples were, for **fear** of the Jews...” John emphasizes the disciples’ fear of the enemies of Jesus and of their authority and power to arrest and imprison and even put to death those who had followed Jesus. How easy would it be for John to see the same kind of fear in us today? But John emphasizes this fear only so that we might grasp more fully the greeting of Jesus.

“While the doors were shut where the disciples were, for **fear** of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, ‘**Peace** be with you... as the Father has sent Me, I also **send** you.’” Can we see the transformation that this peace is about to work in the disciples? No matter how dark the world ever gets, and no matter how much tribulation we may face in this world, the fact remains that we live now in the age of eschatological salvation, and therefore in the age of God’s eschatological peace. And this means that no matter how dark the world ever gets, and no matter how much tribulation we may face in this world, the world will always be the arena for the bold proclamation of the good news of this peace. We are not defeatists because we are never defeated. We are not fearful because, in fact, it is not the world that has the true authority and power at all. Instead, Jesus has given the true authority and power to us, and He has sent us into

the world to exercise this authority and this power through the proclamation of the “Gospel of [His] peace” (cf. Eph. 6:15).

The words of the risen Jesus to His first disciples—though uniquely applicable to them—are still His words to us today. “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”