

Sunday 19 April. The Sunday after Easter

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Children's Activity: Life at the moment is very strange. We can't go out to meet our family and friends. We have to keep well away from other people. For some of us both Daddy and Mummy are working from home, and they will have to help with home schooling now it is the end of the Easter holidays. For some of you holiday plans have had to be postponed. We can only talk to our grandparents, cousins, other family members and friends on FaceTime, WhatsApp or even Zoom. Easter has been very different this year; all because a tiny virus is infecting the whole world, being passed on from person to person. On that first Easter Day, Jesus's friends went from sadness to joy, from tears to laughter, all because their friend had come back to life; life in a very different way; he was never going to die a human death again. The story from the Bible that follows tells us that the friends of Jesus, his disciples, were locked in their house because they were afraid. When Jesus appeared to them, suddenly and unexpectedly, the first words He said to them were: "**Peace be with you.**" In other words he meant, don't be afraid, I am still here, it really is me. Now I can always be with you. Remember those words of Jesus because He is still here with us. We may not be able to see him but his presence lies in the hearts of those who love Him as much as He loves us. A love just like you share in your family. You can't see it, yet most people know what love looks like because love means they are wanted, cared for and are very special. Why not draw a picture for someone you love to show them how much they mean to you. And remember, Jesus still says to us all: "**Peace be with you.**"

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that you love us so much that you died on the cross for us. But we are happy you rose again on that first Easter day. Help us to remember that you are always with us and you still say 'Peace be with you'; help us to know that peace for ourselves. **Amen**

Reading: from **John 20:19-30** ¹⁹ *On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"* ²⁰ *After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.* ²¹ *Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."* ²² *And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* ²³ *If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."* ²⁴ *Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.* ²⁵ *So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."* ²⁶ *A week later his 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!"²⁷ 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."²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Meditation: "*Peace be with you*"; four simple words, yet powerful in sentiment. Jesus was acknowledging his disciples fear. These last few weeks have been extraordinary for us all. With different takes on the experience tinged with incredulity, bewilderment, uncertainty and even fear. The diary is either empty or filled with online conference calls. Daily exercise is interesting; walking in the middle of the road, or veering off footpaths into long grass or trees in order to distance oneself from other walkers. Keeping in touch with family and friends is virtual, and our communal acts of worship are no longer permissible, they are virtual. Isolation and 'stay at home' are key words.

Likewise, life had become very different for Jesus's disciples; they were terrified of the Jewish authorities: locked away in isolation, afraid to go out. What was the cross all about? Their Lord, Master, Friend and Teacher, the Messiah had been crucified and buried. Two of the disciples had seen the empty tomb and a few others, women and men, spoke of seeing Jesus in the flesh. What did it all mean? All hope was shattered and they were too afraid to go and worship in the temple. In isolation you may have been watching and listening to different services and meditations from around the country, joining in virtual worship. I have missed the Easter hymn singing, and share one of my favourites with you.

When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

"Peace be with you"; Jesus's first words to his disciples. They hadn't understood that Jesus's calling, his Godly mission on earth, was to die. They didn't observe the significance, wonder and glory of that first Good Friday. Instead they clung together in fear and hid away behind locked doors. Jesus brought them peace.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the death of Christ my God;
all the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.

"Peace be with you"; without the cross we would be like the pre-Christian Jewish church, whose only way to please God (if devout or at all interested) was to find favour with Him through good works, imperfect worship and the continual offering of sacrifices; atoning for the many times they had failed God's perfect standards. Peace would come second to obligation and ritual. Selfishness had, and still does, come between God and His creation. Sadly, every generation is no better than the last: life can become so busy with work, family,

home and leisure, with the 'wellbeing' agenda focusing materially on a healthy body, mind and emotions; there seems to be very little time left to contemplate any spiritual needs apart from mantra as a form of self-meditation. Without hope and purpose life can become meaningless, especially when unforeseen circumstances come between us and the achievement of self-worth. Exploring the particular peace Jesus Christ offered those first confused and bewildered disciples, may bring us into a greater understanding how God still offers that perfect peace through Him. In pointing to the deeper meaning of the cross and resurrection as the perfect answer, Jesus revealed to His disciples that he offers true peace that cannot be found elsewhere..

See from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down;
did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?

“Peace be with you”; Thomas needed to have proof of Christ’s continued existence. We who follow don’t have that luxury. We need to exercise faith in the belief that Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross is the demonstration of the bitter-sweetness of love. Humanity’s and God’s relationship is only restored through that perfect sacrifice. God incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ, was God’s perfect way of redeeming us once and for all times. The far from perfect unconditional love a parent may have for a child is the nearest example of the depth of God’s love for the world and the peace he offers us who inhabit that world. Christ’s sacrifice was an undeserved act of grace, yet death did not hold Him, He rose again to new life. We are invited to share in that eternal resurrection hope.

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all!

“Peace be with you”; by dying on the cross to reconcile us with God, Jesus demonstrated the cost of discipleship. He put God’s will and purpose before anything else. He was willing to sacrificially go to the cross in order to put us right with God. So often we belittle the impact of Christ’s amazing love for God His father, and His amazing love for us. How may this affect the way we, as Christians, live our lives? Is our love for God such that we give ourselves over to Him, serving Him as his disciples in both good and bad times? Only then will the good news of Easter demonstratively come alive for those around us, even in ‘lockdown’. Once we have fully understood and experienced the peace of God for ourselves, how can we bring Christ’s peace to others?

Collect: *We will never understand, O Risen Lord, the mystery of your death and resurrection, unless we sense it deep within ourselves. We will never believe that it is impossible for Jesus Christ to be held by death, unless we learn to die daily ourselves. Breathe on us your peace-creating and courage-giving Spirit. Deliver us from the oppressive regimes of sin and death. Raise us up to a life of freedom far beyond our wildest imaginings. Embrace us in your ongoing, living tradition which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. Amen.*