

Share the peace of Christ (Shalom)

You may or may not know the traditional greeting & response:

Peace be with you. And also with you.

Sharing the peace of Christ isn't just about meeting other people. It's an affirmation of our identity in Christ. John 20:19-31 shows us the source of the greeting. Jesus offered peace when he appeared to the disciples on that first Sunday evening and a week later. It's a reminder of Christ's greeting and our call to believe and to come together to be reconciled with friends, family and neighbors.

Message: Don't Doubt. Trust Jesus.

Do you believe Jesus rose from the dead?

A week ago, I stood here and asked you that question. The answer lies at the very heart of Christian faith. It's the most important choice we'll ever make. It all hinges on an empty tomb.

The empty tomb is a paradox.

It's both the simplest and most challenging thing to believe in. It's what Jesus' disciples were struggling with on that first Sunday evening. They saw or heard the stories of Jesus' death on the cross on Friday. A long, sad, and terrifying Saturday passed. Then, on the Sunday, the third day after Jesus died, the disciples hear disturbing news.

Mary, Peter and John tell them the tomb is empty.

Angels say Jesus is risen. What does that mean? Mary has an encounter with a mysterious man who she says is Jesus. Nothing makes any sense.

They saw Jesus die. The spear went into his side. He was buried behind a massive stone. The movement to put Jesus on the throne of Israel came to a grinding halt. You can't rule from the grave.

Jesus' closest followers gathered, mourning his death.

There are tears. They're sad. On top of that, they're afraid for their safety. After all, the authorities who killed Jesus want to squash all Messiah rumors. They're wanted men and women.

That's when it happens: Jesus appears. “Shalom,” he says.

It's him! It's really him! Their sadness is gone in an instant. They're filled with joy. Jesus is here. We know he died, but he's here, greeting us and talking to us like he did before.

How can this be?

That's the question some were pondering on Sunday, a week later. Thomas is the most outspoken of the doubters. Thomas is a show-me-the-evidence kind of guy, but he's also very close to Jesus.

It's a week later. How about you?

Do you believe Jesus is your resurrected Lord and Savior? Did you choose to trust God, believing Jesus did a miraculous thing? Or are you like Thomas, waiting for evidence, proof beyond the shadow of a doubt?

Why do we doubt?

There are many reasons, but the narrative from John 20:19-31 offers two. What's the first reason? Fear. The disciples were gathered behind closed doors because they were afraid. They were afraid of the Jewish authorities who falsely charged Jesus, held a mock trial in the middle of the night, and then pressured Pilate into crucifying Jesus.

What kind of fears do we face?

The late night knock on the door or phone call startles us. The only time we disturb other people at night is with bad news. In some parts of the world, authorities and zealots knock on doors. People are taken and never heard from again. The most common kind of fears we face in southern California are different. We fear the uncertainties and unknowns of life. We're afraid of being alone. We're afraid of failing and letting others down. We're afraid we aren't good enough. We're afraid of depression, addiction, anger, abuse, violence, prejudice, mental illness and things that are alien to us. These are all valid fears.

There's another reason the disciples were gathered together.

John 20:11 tells us "*Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.*" She knew the tomb was empty, but was too caught up in her grief to realize what happened. Verse 14 tells us she didn't even recognize Jesus when she turned around and saw him. Jesus asked Mary, "*Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?*" (v14). She thought Jesus was the gardener. It wasn't until Jesus called her by name – "*Mary!*" that she realized who was standing in front of her (v16).

The disciples were gathered together because they were mourning.

They were suffering and sad. Yes, Mary, Peter and John told them about the empty tomb and their encounter with the angels and the risen Christ. But they couldn't hear it. Their hearts and minds were too full of grief and pain. They didn't know what to believe. So they doubted.

Some of us are in pain today.

All of us have known suffering or have family members who are struggling with challenges. When someone we love is hurting, it's hard. We feel their pain, too. We would do anything to take their pain away. Some go so far as to pray for the pain to become theirs, so the other person will have relief. We can't help it. Deep relationships call us to

sacrifice our own interests in healthy ways for the benefit of others. Sympathy is part of our human make up.

I believe grief and sorrow can lock us away, behind the doors of our heart. We put up walls when we're hurt. We don't do it maliciously, but out of self-preservation. We don't want to be hurt more or more deeply. That's one of the reasons why family arguments can be so devastating. When two people are hurting, the things we say and do can cause wounds that last a lifetime.

The problem with putting up walls is that it restricts our view. Walls make our view of God too small. There are a lot of things about life we don't understand. In order to cope, we focus on what we can control. And that's typically what fits in something the size of a box, for example, our home. Jesus came into the box where the disciples were huddled, in fear and sorrow. Jesus didn't enter with violent words or actions. He didn't break down the door. Jesus came offering peace and comfort. Jesus showed he cared. He didn't come to make fun of their doubts or kick Thomas out of the group. Jesus gave them a new perspective. I'm not just talking about blowing their minds. Jesus gave them a new heart. Jesus didn't ask them to understand, but to trust him.

[sermon illustration – connect the dots - appended]

How does the empty tomb help us overcome our suffering?

It gives us a new perspective. We are reminded that Jesus knows what we're going through. Jesus died. We can trust Jesus. We can believe he rose from the dead to save us. We can know that Jesus isn't bound by death, so we aren't either. Jesus' resurrection means we don't have to live in fear or sadness any more. Jesus gives us a second chance ... a third ... a fourth, whatever it takes. When we call Jesus Lord, we're forgiven. Jesus gives us a new perspective, a new lease on life. We learn to forgive others when they do wrong to us. And we're given the power to tell others Jesus forgives them.

Jesus came to the disciples.

He appeared to them behind locked doors. Jesus didn't wait for them to come to him.

Jesus comes to us all.

He comes into our heart and mind. Jesus says, "Do you trust me? Believe in me." He offers comfort. And Jesus gives us a commission...

Here it is: are you awake to Jesus?

Jesus comes to wherever we're hiding – in our heart, mind or body, and tries to wake us up. Have you heard his call? Have you answered?

There's no shame in being sad, afraid or having doubts.

Sharing our sorrow, fears and uncertainty is what makes us healthy. That's what it means to be vulnerable, to be in authentic relationships. When we feel overwhelmed and not up to it, Paul reminds us "*God's grace is sufficient. Jesus' power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). We're most able to accept and receive God's love and help when we're at our most vulnerable.

I believe in Jesus with every fiber of my being. I experienced God in a special way 17 years ago. Guess I needed some evidence, like Thomas. God is present in my life every day. God is present in your life every day. How about you? I know some of you say "yes" without hesitation. Regardless of our personal situation, we know and love Jesus. I also know there are some of you who are "stuck." For whatever reason, you hesitate. I want to encourage you. Don't give up.

An image comes to my mind. Imagine going to a lake. The water looks great, but you just aren't sure about swimming. You decide to go take a better look at the water. Fortunately, there's a canoe. But it's a little far from the dock. You decide you can make it, reach out and ... you guessed it ... you end up with one foot on the dock and one foot in the canoe. It isn't going to end well. You'll end up wet, floundering and in need of help. Let me offer some advice from the heart: trust God.

Break down those walls. Believe Jesus rose from the dead.

It will change your life in amazing ways. Peace be with you.

Let us pray ...

Risen Lord, author of faith, to you we lift our weary, longing eyes. Our fear would close us down to your love and your call on our lives. Even now, send your Spirit among us. Break into our shut-up hearts, unparalyze our fear-filled minds, and unclasp our clenched hands, that we may hear your words of life and truly live. In Jesus' name, Amen.

John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

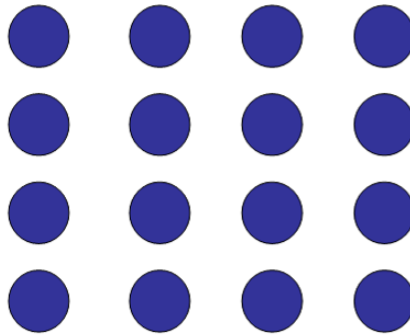
When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when 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.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

How Many Lines Does It
Take to Connect the Dots
Without Crossing?



A New Perspective:
One Line!

