***PEACE BE WITH YOU!***John C. Peterson

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Texts: Revelation 1:4-6 and John 20:19-29

 *Peace be with you*! Wouldn’t it be nice to hear those words spoken this day to the people of Ukraine and Russia by a divine voice with the power to impose such a peace upon them in the same moment the words were being spoken! It is the longing of the remnant of residents eking out an existence day to day in the besieged city of Mariupol! It is the cry of men, women, teens, and children in countless American cities that have been plagued by gun violence over this last year! Shalom! Peace! It has rarely seemed so elusive and yet so badly needed in our world, in our nation, and perhaps most desperately, in our hearts.

 Jesus speaks directly to the hearts of his disciples when he appears among them on Easter evening in that house with locked doors that we heard described in John’s Gospel today*.* It is evening of the same day that the women and disciples discover the empty tomb, the same day that Mary Magdalene reports seeing and speaking with the risen Lord after mistaking him for the gardener. It is a day full of unexpected events, impossible encounters, and audacious claims that have the hearts of the disciples in turmoil. What is to be believed? What can be true? And lurking in the back of their minds: when will the religious leaders and Romans come for us? So, the doors were locked and barred, and the disciples of Jesus hunkered down behind them, unsure of what to do next and wondering what in the world was going on with their world! There is little peace in Holy Week; from Palm Sunday’s parade through Good Friday’s crucifixion to Easter’s dawn and on into the twilight of Easter evening, the pace is frantic except for the silent sorrow of Holy Saturday, the mood fearful and confused, the sentiment shared by all those who called Jesus Lord: *This can’t be happening!* Then Jesus appeared in their midst – suddenly, impossibly – saying: “*Peace be with you*.”

 In his book *Father Joe*, Tony Hendra quotes Father Joseph Warrilow in response to a question about the definition of peace: “*Peace is love….and love peace. Peace is the certainty that you are never alone.*”[[1]](#endnote-1) For disciples who were feeling very much alone that Easter evening, that word of peace from the mouth of the risen Jesus was exactly what they needed to hear, even if it seemed hard to believe. It was the tangible expression of the promise Paul affirms in his letter to the Romans: *Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*. The risen Jesus’ presence among them – confirmed when he showed them the marks in his hands and side – moved the disciples from fear to joy, from despair to hope, from fear of being alone to assurance that Jesus was still with them. The antidote to all their fears was peace offered by Jesus’ risen presence.

 “Peace be with you” were words Jesus had spoken to the disciples often before his death. “*Peace be with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled; do not let them be afraid*,” he had said. “*Peace be with you. Believe in God. Believe also in me*,” he had said. “*Go in peace*,” they had heard him say again and again to those he healed. I wonder whether they recalled those other instances on the night when they heard the risen Jesus utter those familiar words behind those locked doors. For, once they heard his voice, saw the nail marks, and decided that he was not a ghost or figment of their imaginations; once they recognized Jesus as the same Lord they had followed those three years past, the same Lord at whose feet they had sat, the same Lord they had seen crucified, then they dared to believe that what they were seeing and hearing, that ***who*** they were seeing and hearing, was real. Their fears, at least for the moment, were overcome by joy!

 All that were ***there*** rejoiced, but Thomas was not there for some reason – picking up a pizza, visiting a friend, just out for a walk to clear his head – we don’t really know, but we do know that when he returned, he doubted that what they told him of the risen Lord could be true, just as they all had doubted Mary that Easter morning. You can hardly blame Thomas for those doubts; I suspect we would have been right there with him, doubting that the dead Jesus could be alive and speaking to them. A week later when Jesus appeared to the disciples again behind closed doors and said, “*Peace be with you!*” Thomas was there. He saw and heard for himself what his fellow disciples had told him; then he not only believed, but voiced his belief, saying: “*My Lord and my God*!” His doubts were satisfied; his fears eased; his faith sparked! “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*,” says Jesus – which is of course all of us!

 Are you so blessed – blessed to believe what you have not seen with your own eyes or heard with your own ears, blessed to have your fears eased and hope restored by the risen Lord? For, that same Lord speaks those same words to us with the promise that we need not be afraid of what is happening in the present, nor of what the future may hold, need not fear for Ukraine or for our gun-infested cities or for ourselves. That does not mean that we should not be concerned or even angry at what is happening, but it does mean that fear should not paralyze us or push us into unfaithful action or inaction.

*Peace be with you* are Christ’s comforting words to us in the face of any and all problems which arise. When we’re lying in the dust of despair or doubt, God doesn’t leave us there. God helps us to our feet, dusts us off, gives us a pat on the backside, and says, “*Go get ‘em*!” God understands that we may be afraid, so God offers us peace. It may not be the peace we so desperately desire – a cessation to all the violence that rears its ugly head around us – but peace for our hearts in the assurance that the God who is stronger than death is with us and with our brothers and sisters in those seemingly Godforsaken places. It is peace to sustain and strengthen us, peace with which to face any adversity.

 It is such peace that John of Patmos offers to the churches to which he writes in Revelation. “*Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come,*” he writes. Those churches were suffering persecution; they were the victims of violence directed toward them for their faith in the risen Christ. Like the disciples on that Easter evening, they lived in fear of who might next come knocking on their door. The antidote for their fears, as for the disciples that Easter evening, was God’s peace, the assurance of God’s presence, and in the unfolding story of Revelation, the promise that in the end God would win; despite the chaos in their lives, God had not abandoned them, but would remember and save them as God had promised.

 There are some today who fear that we are living in apocalyptic times like those of which John of Patmos wrote. Pat Robertson has even suggested that Russian President Vladimir Putin was “compelled by God” to attack Ukraine as part of God’s plan for the end times.[[2]](#endnote-2) Let me be crystal clear: Vladimir Putin’s war against Ukraine has little to do with God’s plan for the world and much more to do with sin and its corrupt effect on human actions. God weeps for those who suffer in the war in Ukraine as God weeps for all those who suffer in such wars in opposition to God’s expressed desire for us to love our neighbors and our enemies! Such apocalyptic interpretations of today’s events ignore the repeated refrain of Scripture that no one knows when Christ will return in glory – not me, not you, not Pat Robertson, no one! World events give rise to apocalyptic angst as we see so many chaotic things happening that are beyond our control – as they did at the time of the Civil War, in World War I and again in World War II, in the 1970s with Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth,* and again at the turn of the millennium when some folks thought the world would end with Y2k. As Matthew Avery Sutton, a Washinton State University history professor and author of *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism,* observes:

*The apocalyptic obsession ebbs and flows in moments of crisis*. *We’re at another moment where prophecy is invoked to make sense of current events*.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

 What Christ offers us to make sense of current events is the same thing he offered the disciples in that room on Easter evening: *Peace be with you!* In the face of angst and fear, turmoil and war, unsettled days and sleepless nights, peace be with you! It is the assurance of God’s presence with us, God’s unending love for us, and God’s plan for us which will not be derailed by any human activity! Our role is to be faithful day by day by day – to live in faith and love, to persevere without fear, without hate, without anxiety, trusting in God’s promises in the risen Christ. “*As the Father sent me, so I send you*,” Jesus told his disciples. “*Receive the Holy Spirit*.” Then he breathed on them – the breath of life, the power of God, that same Spirit that Luke describes at Pentecost. Into the lungs of those anxious, breathless disciples Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit, empowering them to go out from behind locked doors to serve as living witnesses to the risen Lord, to serve as Jesus served – in humility and love and faith and faithfulness.

 We too have received that life-giving spirit, that gift of God to empower the people of God to share the good news of the risen Lord who says, *Peace be with you!* That is our mission, our calling – to proclaim that good news, but also to live in the assurance of that good news, to dare to believe where we have not seen, to hold on to hope in all times including these chaotic times, and to live in peace with God and with one another. “*As the Father sent me, so I send you*,” says Jesus to us. So go, as he said. Go and live, love, serve, proclaim in word and in deed God’s good news! And God’s peace be with you! Wherever you go, whatever you do, come what may, God’s peace be with you! Amen

1. Father Joseph Warrilow (Father Joe) quoted by Tony Hendra in *Father Joe*, p.100 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Why Russia’s invasion of Ukraine holds significance in end-times circles”, *The Washington Pos*t, March 12, 2022, p.B2 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Id. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)