

# PEACE BE WITH YOU

## Sermon by Rev. Ron Farr

Based on John 20:19-31  
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**Emmanuel Congregational Church**  
119 S. Hamilton Street, Watertown, NY 13601  
315-782-2650  
Email sermons: [admin@emmanuelchurchucc.org](mailto:admin@emmanuelchurchucc.org)  
Audio Sermons: Call 315-782-2650  
Website: [emmanuelchurchucc.org](http://emmanuelchurchucc.org)

This past week was a difficult one for Patty's family. Her cousin Brian, after a long and tortured life of struggle, addiction, and mental illness, ended his life. It was such a sad ending to a life that was, yes, troubled, yet also had a good number of bright and redeeming moments. Brian's suicide stunned and numbed everyone. I don't think there was one family member or friend who did not ask himself or herself if there wasn't something more they could have done. Patty was asked by her family to do the funeral in Connecticut.

Brian's only sibling, Kim, who lives in New Mexico, oversaw the funeral arrangements. Through much of Brian's adult life, Kim was the one who was always watching over her younger brother and was constantly challenging him or bailing him out of trouble. It was hard for Kim to get any real information about what led up to Brian's suicide. It was very stressful trying to communicate with all the survivors of Brian's many broken relationships, some whom were at odds with each other. And to add one stress upon another, Kim had just gotten her mother, who was seriously ill in another part of the country, released from the hospital and into the nursing home.

The day before the funeral, Kim was visibly numb from her sorrow and stress. She was doing a heroic job, but clearly was under siege emotionally. It was hard for her to cope with so many disparate realities and decisions. She was having a hard time focusing. When the funeral was finally over, and Kim was reviewing the day, she said, *"it was like I was in a long tunnel. I couldn't quite take everything in, I couldn't quite hear what everyone was saying."*

I'm sure the disciples of Jesus felt a similar emotional overload and numbness from the unrelenting sorrow of Jesus' death. In the first days immediately following his horrific crucifixion, they, of course, had no funeral. They all hid in a house behind closed doors for fear of being arrested and crucified themselves. They had to keep their grief bottled up in themselves.

It may be hard for us to appreciate how devastating this was for them. They had lost the one who they had loved with all their heart, the one who had shown them God's love and

grace, the one who had healed them and shown them their undeniable self-worth, the one who had introduced them to the kingdom of God in the here and now. This wonderful, wonderful man had been brutally snuffed out right before their eyes. How could the world be so cruel and unjust? How could one who is so beautiful, so gentle, so loving be tortured to death? What meaning could life or their religion possibly have when such unspeakable things happen?

And how would they go on with their lives now? What would the purpose of life be? How could they be happy? How would they live in this new and destitute reality which was devoid of Jesus and his spirit? This was a picture so despairing and so confusing for them. They didn't really know how they were going to manage. They couldn't settle on any comforting thought. It was impossible to think clearly. Nothing was the same, and nothing seemed right.

Into this house of fear and sorrow and emotional agitation, the risen Jesus entered. The text says, *"Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'* Jesus' first word is *"Peace."* He repeats this word many times. I think he was telling the disciples that despite all their wrenching anguish and disappointment, there was a peace near them that was bigger and deeper than all this sorrow.

It is interesting to note that after Jesus says *"Peace be with you,"* the scripture then says, *"He showed them his hands and his side.... Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you.'"* The fact that he shows them his crucifixion wounds is profoundly significant. First, he is obviously showing his wounds as a way of saying, *"I am the same Jesus who was crucified a few days ago. Here is your proof. See that I am risen."*

But there is another important meaning to his gesture. Jesus is showing them his wounds, not his strengths. He does not want them to run away from what is difficult. He wants them to see the wounds and vulnerabilities of humanity. He wants them to face and accept their own wounds.

It is as though the primary thing that the risen Christ wants to say to them is this: *"Despite all of life's wounds and sorrows, everything nonetheless is OK. It really is OK, and you can just relax. Peace be with you. Let yourself feel God's peace surrounding you - no more battling, no more anxiety, no more fear. God is deeper than all these storms - even my crucifixion will not destroy us. You can relax with life, you can relax with death, you can relax with life's disappointments and sorrows, you can relax with betrayal and all of humanity's imperfections, because God is holding all of this and God is an ocean of peace."*

The disciples knew that their sorrow and grief was real. What they did not realize is that there is something even MORE REAL, more fundamental than that - and that is God's peace. That is why the risen Christ, who still carries his wounds of crucifixion, comes to them and says, *"Peace be with you."*

We all need to hear this message of peace. We all get tied up knots. We all get stunned by life's disappointments and pains like Patty's cousin Kim, trying to manage all the painful details and all her feelings concerning her brother's suicide and funeral. Whenever we

have to make big decisions, when something is wrong with a family member, when we lose our job or have a seemingly unsolvable problem, we struggle, we stress, we live in a house of fear and hopelessness. And we need Christ to come to us, and look at our wounds, say, *“Don’t worry too much about these wounds. Everything is OK. Peace be with you.”*

Once we begin to appropriate the power of such paradoxical peace, we learn another profound thing from these wounds that Christ shows us. By showing the disciples his wounds, Jesus is inviting them not to harden their hearts, but to be vulnerable, and to feel Jesus’ vulnerability as he is held by the power of God. This divine vulnerability is an important doorway through which we catch sight of heaven, that we know our own humanity, sensitively feel other’s pain, and feel connected to all creation just as God is.

After Jesus was crucified, the disciples, under the weight of such pain, surely were tempted to cover their hearts with armor and go numb emotionally. To survive in their world that just crucified their Lord, they would want to train themselves, if they had not done so already, to keep their guard up, distrust others, condemn others, tune people out, and prevent any random kindness from seeping out too easily. This would be a natural way for them to protect themselves from the harsh, abusive, and morally primitive world in which they lived. And the world in which we live is not all that different.

The risen Christ, through his wounds, persistently calls all of us into another world that is tender and kind and sensitive, a loving world in which people are tuned into each other’s needs, and are caring for each other, a world in which there is no armor, no separation between the “haves” and “have-nots,” a world in which people’s needs are met and everyone is loved and valued.

This is the world that we seek every time we enter this church on a Sunday morning, or enter a faith-sharing group or committee meeting during the week. Instead of being forceful or aggressive as the world would encourage, we suddenly try to be gentle and walk in each other’s shoes. Instead of giving orders, we suddenly try to listen sensitively. Instead of having our guard up and distrusting others, we suddenly try to feel or express vulnerable things. This is a very difficult passage to make as we try to move from one world into another. When you love, you sometimes get hurt. But we are always given the strength to forge a world of love and grace because we can always hear Jesus saying to us, *“Peace be with you.”*

After the risen Christ offers peace, the text goes on to say, *“Then he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”* The action of Jesus breathing his spirit into the disciples sounds a little like someone doing CPR, administering mouth to mouth resuscitation. And Jesus’ action is reminiscent of the words in Gen 2:7 that read, *“the Lord God formed human out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.”*

So the risen Christ breathed his spirit, breathed his essence, into the disciples. And what is that spirit, what is that essence of Jesus that he breathes into them? It is not just peace - it is the spirit of forgiveness! Once Jesus breathes into them, he says, *“Now if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”* He does not give them the power to turn stones

into bread or the power to lord it over the Romans. He gives them the power to forgive, perhaps the greatest power of all.

There was a great need for forgiveness after the crucifixion and after Easter. The disciples needed to forgive the Romans for killing Jesus. The disciples needed to forgive the Pharisees, their own religious leaders, for their part in handing Jesus over to the Romans. The disciples also needed to forgive each other – they were very angry with Judas who betrayed Jesus with a kiss and for 30 pieces of silver. And they were disappointed in their very human leader, Peter, who had denied even knowing Jesus. But even more difficult, they needed to forgive THEMSELVES – for they all were ashamed that everyone of them had fled and let Jesus die alone, because they were afraid they would be crucified too.

To completely forgive and accept others and ourselves is to be very relaxed with life as it is. This is the spirit of Jesus. This is the spirit Jesus brings to Thomas who was the one disciple missing when the risen Jesus first appeared. Thomas is the only one who is asked to believe without seeing. And he is the only one who is honest and vulnerable enough to say, *"I have my doubts about this. I cannot believe until I put my finger in the wounds of his hands and feet."*

Thomas sounds decidedly contemporary when he makes his declaration of doubt. Christ returns to Thomas to give him whatever he needs so that he won't remain stuck in his doubt. He does this for you and me as well. The text says, *"Jesus came and stood among them, and 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.'* And Thomas's eyes and heart opened, and he believed, and he exclaimed, *"My Lord and My God."*

Notice that Jesus does not ever criticize Thomas for questioning. In fact, he honors Thomas' questions by providing the proof he needed to move on in his spiritual journey. If Jesus had not come to Thomas as he did, maybe Thomas would have dried up spiritually and ceased to be a disciple altogether.

No doubt Jesus honors our questions as well. At the heart of real Christian community that we are trying to build here at Emmanuel, we must offer that same deep acceptance to each other that Jesus gave to Thomas. We must allow each other to voice our questions and doubts and worries, so that we all can face the immensity of life and death, and break through to a deeper peace.

The day after Brian's funeral Patty's mother had a dream. She dreamt that she was on the beach in the front of her cottage and was looking out into the Niantic river. She spotted Brian, out a distance from the shore, happily swimming past the cottage. It was as though he was exercising out there, or just enjoying the water. When he spotted Helen on the shore, he stopped his stroke and smiled and waved to her. Then he continued swimming on. Patty's mother felt as though he was saying, *"Everything is OK."*

Everything is OK. Even when there are crucifixions and suicides and difficult times, there still is an ocean of peace that passes all understanding. We live by such limited perspectives and conclusions about ourselves, about our futures, about others, about life,

and about God. Like the original disciples of Jesus fearfully hiding from the Romans in an upper room, we too are often inhabiting houses of fear and doubt and negativity. And like Thomas, we sometimes feel like we have missed the boat and we protect ourselves from our own vulnerable searching and loving by declaring, “I will not believe.”

Don't do that anymore. The risen Christ is here to stretch your minds and hearts. Let Jesus breathe his essence into you – his peace, his power of forgiveness, his relaxed and loving spirit toward all the imperfections of humanity. Let the risen Christ give you a bigger experience of peace.

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