

Peace be with you  
Reading from the Gospels: John 20:19-31

Dad was taking his nap before bedtime on the couch ... and he was snoring. In fact, I think that was the night I recorded his snoring on a little reel-to-reel I had received for Christmas so that I could present it as Exhibit A to refute his regular denials. Otherwise, it was a normal Saturday night and I was watching the weekly *creature feature* on the independent St. Louis tv station. The movie? *War of the Worlds*, not the Tom Cruise version, the 1953 one starring Gene Berry and Ann Robinson.

As I read this week's story of the risen Jesus greeting his disciples behind their closed and locked door, a scene of that old movie emerged from some locked and cobwebbed safety deposit box deep in my memory bank. Believe it or not the '53 version of *War of the Worlds* included a love story threading through all the destruction, mayhem, and fake blood. A fireball flashes across the Southern California sky crashing into a mountain gulley east of L.A. Dr. Clayton Forester of the Pacific Technical Institute arrives to investigate the strange long cylinder that fell to earth; and cue the violins, Forrester, needing a place to stay

while he investigates, receives hospitality in the home of the beautiful Sylvia Van Buren and her uncle, the Rev. Dr. Matthew Collins.

Soon, three goose-necked, swanlike aircraft rise from the cylinder and start incinerating anything that gets too close, so here come the Marines, the Air Force, and the Army, all frothing to fire up the big guns. However, the good reverend intercedes, pointing out that no one has sought to make peace with them.

And through the magic of *Google*, here's the script.

Pastor Dr. Matthew Collins: I think we should try to make them understand we mean them no harm. They are living creatures out there.

Sylvia: But they're not human. Dr. Forrester says they're some kind of advanced civilization.

Pastor Dr. Matthew Collins: If they're more advanced than us, they should be nearer the creator for that reason. No real attempt has been made to communicate with them, you know?

Sylvia: Let's go back inside, Uncle Matthew.

Pastor Dr. Matthew Collins: I've done all I can in there. You go back.

Sylvia, I like that Dr. Forrester, he's a good man. *He then turns and approaches the Martian aircraft.*

Soldier: Who's that? What's he think he's doing?

Sylvia: Uncle! Uncle Matthew!

Major General Mann: It's too late now. He's too far away.

Pastor Dr. Matthew Collins: Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

Forrester: It's seen him!

Pastor Dr. Matthew Collins: Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.

ZAP!! And well, ashes to ashes.

Sylvia: [scream]

Col. Ralph Heffner: Let'm have it! Fire!! (*IMDb*)

And thus, the myth persists that the correlation between faith vs. firepower is synonymous with the correlation between weakness vs. strength or dreamers vs. realists or naivety vs. survival of the fittest. Those who gravitate toward peacemaking are called *snowflakes* while those who hew to survival of the fittest are called champions, conquerors. Yet, couldn't this be a false dichotomy? Couldn't it be said that very often it is the bully who acts out of weakness and that it is often the strongest among us who will refuse to fight? At the lunch counter in Greensboro, who was weak and who was strong when the nonviolent protesters refused to engage the mob that was taunting them, pushing them, spitting on them? Who was weak and who was strong when 6-yr.-old Ruby Bridges, all lace-trimmed socks and a bow

in her hair, entered William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans as its first black student with the crowd standing by shouting epithets, throwing things at her, and one school mom threatening to poison her? Who is weak and who is strong when the nonviolent refuse to be baited by the violent, when the peacemaker is undaunted by tyrant?

The prophet Isaiah will tell you. 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away ... 9 They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth ... 11 Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities ... he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” Who’s the weak one in the prophet’s narrative as we read it through the lens of the crucified and risen Christ?

The journey through Lent to Easter not only reframes our understanding of weakness and strength but calls us to join in the courageous work that makes for peace. Our text today takes us back to the evening of that first Easter when Jesus makes his first post-resurrection appearance to his disciples. It was a meeting that could have been extremely awkward and tense as things had quickly deteriorated after their last gathering. Jesus was arrested, beaten, tried, beaten some more, and executed on a cross; while simultaneously all those declarations of loyalty and commitment from Jesus' disciples quickly vaporized when confronted by the intimidating might of Rome and the harsh judgments of the temple hierarchy. The disciples scattered, hid, and went so far as to deny even knowing the rabbi from Galilee.

What are the feelings and emotions that rise within you when you cannot escape/avoid/find any excuse to postpone a meeting with someone who has betrayed you, denied you, or broken your heart; someone that was nowhere to be found when you walked through that dark valley? Are you locked and loaded, your heart tuned to revenge? Or, does dread overwhelm you with wishes for a tornado to intercede

making such meetings impossible? Or, does the delicious taste of bitterness rule out any moves toward reconciliation, and thus only allow you to sharpen your words and manner into a dagger of polite malevolence when you do meet?

Though he had every reason to approach the encounter with dread or veiled bitterness or guns blazing, Jesus chose a different path, the path that requires the most strength and the most courage. John reports, "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."

"Peace be with you." Before we dismiss this as an innocent greeting, a 1<sup>st</sup> Century *'How ya doin?'* and move on to disparaging Thomas for what we're guilty of day after day, I think we may want to remember the wisdom of the biblical scholars who said that an important clue to the meaning of a text is to be found in the words and phrases that are repeated. "Peace be with you." Three times. Jesus utters the phrase three times in this text. That could be important.

If you remember a couple weeks ago when the gifted orator Dr. Jerry Cannon was with us, you may have noticed his use of a classic rhetorical tool. When he made a point, he'd play with you a little bit, as if you were falling behind and he was trying to get you to catch up. He'd follow a point with a question, like '*Are you with me?*' or "*Did you catch that?*" And he'd answer himself: '*I don't think you've got it, so let me say it again.*' And he'd repeat the point, ask the same question, and repeat the point a third time. It was fun, but behind it was the serious intention of pushing you to remember something important.

"Peace be with you." Three times. It wasn't a casual greeting like *What's up?* Rather, it was a mission statement wrapped in a gospel truth. Peace be with you. He meant what he said because the whole point of his life, death, and resurrection was to make those words not only possible, but a living, breathing reality that no power or principality can ever take away.

Peace be with you and among you. That's the whole ball game right there, isn't it? Peace be with you and among you. That's God's primary intention for creation in the first place.

Unfortunately, though, Jesus says *Peace* and we hear *Security*. Look at the setting. John says, “and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.” Now, security has its place and in a broken world we can be most grateful for the service of soldiers, the police, and the neighborhood watch program. Though it drives me crazy, I understand the reason we have a church security system; and I deeply appreciate that our clerk of session attended a workshop on active shooter situations. That’s security, but that’s not peace.

However, in confusing these two distinct concepts, our quest for peace of mind and heart through security can shrink our world into a lonely place of paranoia. Think of all the ways our lives are lived behind metaphorical locked doors — “Well, I’ll never shop in that store again.” “I haven’t spoken to that friend, that cousin, that parent, that sibling in years. I’ll never forgive them.” “Fredo, you are dead to me now!”

Add some more locks. Build a bigger fence; another wall; a more lethal nuke. Everyone and everything becomes suspect and is seen as a threat, and as George Eliot asked, “What loneliness is more lonely than distrust?” And as Alexandr Dumas observed, “Pure love and suspicion

cannot dwell together: at the door where the latter enters, the former makes its exit.”

Peace be with you. It is important to read these words of Jesus in light of an earlier promise he made to these same disciples. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Security has its place but if you want peace, you’re going to have to take the risk of trust and open the locked door of your hearts and minds.

Jesus didn’t wait for the disciples to come groveling back to him. No, even locked doors would not be a barrier to his mercy and grace. He does not put parameters on the hope and love he brings to them. Peace be with you. Jesus then proceeds to give them the essential element for true peace. He says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." When reading that instruction this week, it struck me. I don’t think he’s talking about a form of church discipline. I’m wondering if Jesus is here actually making an observation about the consequences of

mercy given and mercy refused. If you forgive someone, you are freed from the bitterness that corrodes and freed for life, relationship, reconciliation, and joy. However, the longer you retain the sins of others and nurse the grudge and pick at the wound, the infection slowly destroys your spirit. As I have said before, sometimes mercy is just getting to the point that you can wish the offender well and actually mean it. You refuse to allow the wound to stay behind the locked door of your heart, spirit, and mind. In other words, you choose life.

Paul understood this. From prison he encouraged the Philippians: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Renowned Israeli-Jewish conductor and concert pianist Daniel Barenboim has conducted many of the world’s top orchestras, yet one orchestra he conducts, the one probably closest to his heart, is possibly the most daunting challenge, most controversial project, and most important work he has undertaken yet. The Western-Eastern Divan

Orchestra is made up of Jewish and Islamic musicians from Syria, Palestine, Iran, and Israel that Barenboim has recruited and trained, bringing them together in Berlin for two months a year and taking them to perform on the greatest stages of the world.

In a 60 Minutes profile last Sunday, we learned that some of the musicians here risk punishment from their governments for performing with Israelis. Nadim Husni, a violist from Damascus, Syria hasn't been able to go back to see his parents for eight years. Barenboim admits that the orchestra will not bring peace. So, why do it? He says, "Because in the orchestra, we have equality. So when you create a situation in which there is a Palestinian clarinet player, who has a difficult solo. And you have the whole orchestra wishing him well and accompanying him, is the only place where a group that includes so many Israelis wishes the Palestinian well and vice versa." (*60 Minutes*)

When the reporter pointed out that the Middle East is no orchestra, and there is no conductor to tell them what to do, Barenboim says, "I know. I am a conductor. I'm not a politician. I'm a conductor. And therefore, I do what I feel I can do."

Barenboim has also opened a music school in Ramallah on the Israeli-occupied West Bank. When he took 60 Minutes there and he and the reporter walked along one of the intimidating walls built to separate the Israelis and Palestinians, he says, “The walls only serve to deceive.” And when the reporter points out that the walls make the Israelis feel safe in their homes, Barenboim offers this thought in his rich-Israeli accent, “They’re not ... It’s a make-believe, a make believe.”

*(60 Minutes)*

If we confuse security with peace, or when we assume the mighty are strong and the peacemakers are weak, we will only continue to dwell behind the locked doors of our minds and hearts, and though we may survive we will not truly live. Peace be with you. It is Christ’s gift to us and our primary calling in this life.

Oh, by the way, in that old version of War of the Worlds, at the end when the mighty had fallen and the invaders were failing, you know where the survivors were? In a church, praying. Just sayin’...