A Sermon for the First Sunday after Easter, April 15, 2007

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In the gospel today (John 20:19f.), the risen Christ greets the disciples with the words, "Peace be unto you." The word "peace" in the Bible means more than the absence of war or external conflict. Peace comes from the Jewish word *Shalom.* It refers to a state of inner health and wholeness and to harmony between people and within the whole created order.

The ideal condition of peace existed in the beauty and order of the original creation. God declared the creation "very good," and rested on the seventh day. There was peace–harmony within man, between man and God and among mankind. This peace was shattered by man's disobedience. Two incidents revealed the absence of peace. First, having sinned, man became afraid of God. Second, man came to be at enmity with himself as Cain became jealous and murdered his brother.

The purpose of the covenant God made with Israel was to restore peace. The covenant sacrifices dealt with man's sin. The Torah taught man how live a rightly ordered life. Sacrifice and faithfulness would result in forgiveness and peace.

Towards the end of the Old Testament, as Israel proved unfaithful to the covenant and was sent into exile, the prophets began to use the word peace to speak of a future Messianic age. Isaiah spoke of one who would be called the "Prince of Peace" (Is. 9:6). In Ezekiel, God said, "I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant" (Ezekiel 27:26).

God's "peace plan" was to fulfill the promises he made in his covenant with Israel and bring about the promised covenant peace. God sent his Son, Jesus, to live in obedience to the Torah and to offer the sacrifice which fulfilled all the Torah sacrifices. As Colossians says, Jesus "made peace through the blood of his cross" (1:20). Thus, when Jesus greeted the disciples with the words, "Peace be unto you," he was declaring to them the fulfillment of the covenant and the beginning of the restoration of all things to harmony with God.

Jesus gave the apostles the power to forgive sins. If human sin is the root cause of discord, then people must have the forgiveness of sins if they are to experience peace. In the apostolic ministry, forgiveness is proclaimed chiefly through the sacraments, which are outward signs of the promise of forgiveness. For example, the water of baptism is an outward sign that our sins are washed away.

The Eucharist has significant points of correspondence with the gospel scene in the upper room. Jesus showed the disciples the signs of his death as proof that he was alive. Jesus shows himself to us in the bread and wine which become his body and blood. These are signs for us of the crucified and risen Lord. We, "Behold the lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world." And we receive the blessing of peace—"the peace of God which passeth all understanding."

We experience the peace of God because our sins are forgiven and we are restored to fellowship with God. We can pray to him without fear, calling God, "Father." We can live without guilt and shame. We have, in Christ, an inner sense of health and wholeness. This inner peace leads to renewed and harmonious relationships with others, especially those others who also know the peace of God.

Peace is God's gift to us in Christ, but we must work to sustain that peace. It is easy to become distracted, to focus on the wrong things, to fall into subtle forms of unfaithfulness, to drift away from faith and so lose our peace. We must continually remember again all that Christ has done. We must continually return to the altar of God with a penitent heart and genuine faith to receive again the promise of forgiveness and renew our experience of peace.

And we must work to spread that peace to our families and our other spheres of influence. We must forgive others as we have been forgiven so that our lives might provide a taste and witness of the coming kingdom of peace; as Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

There is something special about Low Sunday. The crowd has thinned, but the risen Christ is still present to show us his hands and his side, to announce that the covenant has been fulfilled through his life and death and to give us the promise of forgiveness and peace.

As God said through Jeremiah, "Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah...I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (31:31-34).

And, as Romans says, "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).