

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
John 20:19-31

April 15, 2007
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Jesus Appears to His Disciples

19On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

22And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus Appears to Thomas

24Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

26A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

30Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The book after which this sermon is titled is called "*Would You Rather?*" Your question is probably "rather what?" "What would I rather?" Let me give you an example of how the book works. Okay, choose a number between 1 and 253. Go ahead, anyone just holler one out. Okay number "X". Okay, here's your question—and please think of this as rhetorical and don't actually answer out loud. Would you rather "X" or "Y"? It gets you thinking doesn't it. From the ridiculous and mundane to the sublime, this little book helps you to think outside the box. And it's also just a lot of fun. I adore this little book. It has saved me from some pretty awkward moments when I've been in groups and nobody has anything to say and yet everyone feels like someone should be saying something. In those situations I pull out my copy of "*Would You Rather?*" and let the questioning begin.

My favorite *Would You Rather* question of all time is "Would you rather your eyebrows move all over your fore head when you talk or you leave a trail of paprika behind you everywhere you go?" Can you imagine such a choice—wandering eyebrows or a never-ending stream of paprika following you wherever you go. I suppose your answer to this question would have something to do with your affinity for paprika, but for me I know the answer to this *Would You Rather Question* is, hands down, the whole paprika thing. I can't imagine standing up here every Sunday morning with my eyebrows dancing all over my forehead; that would be unacceptable. But, I don't care if someone were to follow my paprika trail and discover that I check my refrigerator at least 15 times every evening just to see if, by chance, some delectable morsel of yumminess has miraculously taken the place of the celery sticks and low fat yogurt on the second shelf. I don't care if someone knows I've been around.

There was a woman in the church I served in Rhode Island, Nancy Speed, who, though she did not leave a trail of paprika behind her, I always knew if she had been in the church building because of the scent she left behind her. If the church building smelled of Obsession for Women perfume, I knew Nancy had been there. And what was more, if I smelled the perfume, I knew that not only had Nancy stopped by, but that something had gotten accomplished. Nancy Speed is a real go-getter and she gave tirelessly of her time and energy to that church's Christian Education program. If I smelled Obsession for Women in our Resource Room, I knew she had found a new children's book of which she was so fond that she just couldn't help but to buy a copy for the church's children's library. If I smelled Obsession for Women in the church office, I knew she had been in there working with the office staff to get out a special mailing or announcement about the Sunday School program. If I smelled Obsession for Women in the church kitchen, I knew Nancy had been in there teaching the Sunday School children a Bible lesson using a cooking project as an illustration. And if I smelled Obsession for Women in the church meeting room, I knew that Nancy had been at a Church Council meeting representing the interests of the children of the church. Wherever Nancy went in that building, she not only left behind the lingering scent of Obsession for Women, but she also left behind important lessons, resources, and memories of her many kindnesses. And even now, years later, I trust that Nancy is still wearing Obsession for Women and still knocking herself out to make sure the children of that church know about God's love for them.

Nancy's example, and this ridiculous question from *Would You Rather*, lead me to ask myself and all of you—what are you leaving behind? Do folks know when you've been around? Are there tell tale signs that Tom or Jane or Jim has been in the house? Is the evidence of your recent presence in a place nearly as obvious as if you had actually left behind a trail of paprika? When you leave the room, what do you leave behind?

In this morning's reading from the Gospel of John, we discover what Jesus intends to leave behind. More than once, Jesus tells the disciples "Peace be with you." To understand the enormity of what he is saying, we need to review the context in which Jesus is speaking. This is the evening of Easter. Jesus' followers, most of whom did not comprehend that he had been resurrected and was no longer dead, have gathered together in a house. I imagine they had not walked casually into the home as a group, but rather they arrived one at a time under the cloak of nighttime darkness. They were afraid. They feared the religious leaders would come after them just as they had come after Jesus. They needed each other as they grieved and so they wanted to be together on that night. And though they yearned for their companions, they were afraid and so arranged to arrive at the house one at a time so as not to draw attention to themselves. And then, as each arrived, I can see him pulling down the latch on the door to lock himself and the others safely inside. And then as each new disciple arrived, perhaps there was a code word whispered or a secret knock administered and thus each arriving disciple gained entry into that house of mourning inhabited by folks who were not only grieving, but were also anxious and afraid. And it was into this locked up fortress, this place of despair and great sadness that Jesus suddenly appears declaring, "Peace be with you." Surely the disciples gathered there were feeling anything BUT peaceful. And yet Jesus tells them, peace be with you. And then again, after he revealed his identity to them by showing them the holes in his hands and side, again he said "Peace be with you."

Jesus wants the disciples to know that in spite of the horrors they had witnessed during that past week, in spite of the fact that many of them betrayed him while he was on trial, in spite of the fact that only one of them showed up to be with him as he died on the cross, in spite of the fact that the disciples did not believe the women when they told them about the resurrection, in spite of the fact that the disciples had, in a nutshell, really messed up, in spite of all that, Christ offers them peace—not just with words but also by bestowing the Holy Spirit upon them. Christ offers them the peace that comes from knowing that no matter how badly they screw up, God forgives them and loves them. Christ offers them the peace of knowing that even though Christ will no longer be with them, the Holy Spirit will be and so they will never be alone. Christ offers them the peace of knowing that God has triumphed over death and that because Christ lives, they too shall live, not just in this life but in the life eternal. This is the peace Christ offers the disciples. And, this is the peace Christ offers to us.

Peace has, quite ironically, become a divisive word in our society. It's been politicized and partisanized. Some have come to think of supporting the cause for peace as unpatriotic. Others have come to think of supporting the cause for peace as something for sissies. Still others have come to think of supporting the cause for peace as being anti-our troops. I don't know how this has happened, but I do believe the current division and strife over the idea of peace is absolutely absurd, it creates a false dichotomy that is used for political purposes and, quite frankly, it would make Christ weep. Three times on that first Easter night—three times—Jesus says “Peace be with you.” And on one occasion it is followed by, “As God has sent me, so I send you.” Could the message be any clearer—are we not meant to be peace makers—are we not meant to leave a trail of peace behind us just as Christ did? If Jesus' post-resurrection message was not one of peace, well then I can't figure out for the life of me what it was.

And so it begs the question—do you leave peace behind you? Or, when you arrive on the scene, do people get a sense of the peace within you. Do you radiate the Good News of the love, peace, and justice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, or do your tense posture, your curt words, and the glare in eye indicate that you will be leaving something far from peaceful in your wake. When you leave a room do people feel a sense of peace because you have been there or relief because you have left?

It begs the question, what are you leaving behind? If someone were to catch a trace of the scent of your perfume or cologne on the air—though not here in church because of our allergy sufferers of course—but if someone knew you had been around, would that elicit a feeling of goodness and warmth in them or a sense of anxiety and dread? Would someone get the sense that a place was more at peace because you had been there? When I talk about being a peace maker, I'm not talking about standing on a street corner at a protest, or writing letters to your senator, or even coming to our monthly contemplative prayers for peace gatherings though these are all ways some folks choose to be peace makers. What I'm asking about you, what I ask myself about, is—your personal essence/my personal essence—my very being/your very being—are we a people at peace and of peace? Have we taken into ourselves the Risen Christ's message of peace. Do we really believe that Christ came not only to bring us life and the life everlasting but also to bring us peace of mind, peace of heart, and peace of soul? And if we believe it, are we living it? Do we carry the peace of Christ with us—is it obvious to others that the Holy Spirit accompanies us on our journey through this life? Now this doesn't mean that

we're warm and fuzzy doormats for everyone to stomp all over. Rather, it means we do as Jesus did—leaving people with a sense that God is present, that God is love, and that God is peace. Let's go forward into this week leaving not a trail of paprika behind us, but rather a trail of peace so that, if not all of those we meet, then at least some of those we meet, might know the Risen Christ because of the way we have lived among them—if but for just a fleeting moment. May the peace of Christ be with you, and you, and you, and all of us. Thanks be to God for the peace of the Risen Christ.