

Peace Be With You
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 53:10-12; Philippians 2:5-11; John 20:19-31

Our final Scripture reading today comes from John 20:19-31. May God add His richest blessing to His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “On 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!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So 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.” A 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!” Then 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.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But 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.”

We are living in the era of superheroes. According to Wikipedia, there were 8 superhero films released in 2018, and 12 are set to be out in 2019 – one for every month in the year. I wonder if we aren’t gravitating to superhero stories again because our world seems out of control, and superhero stories give us a mythology that says that good will triumph over evil, no matter how big the threat.

But there’s a different story going on right now in the Marvel universe. As many of you know, last year a huge number of superheroes came together in the movie called *Infinity War* to take on a cosmic bad guy named Thanos. Since it’s been out for a year, I can spoil a little bit of it for you – they lost. The bad guy won. And in an instant, half of our superheroes disappeared from existence. It was a shock.

The sequel, *Endgame*, comes out next Thursday. Right before Easter, people are buying up advance tickets left and right to find out if their favorite superheroes will remain dead or rise from the grave. Ironic, isn’t it? People consider Jesus passé, irrelevant, hard to understand and hard to take...and yet we are desperate to know that things will be all right, that not even death will stop good from conquering evil once and for all. We reject the truth that can save us, but God has hardwired it in us to look to the story of resurrection.

But there's something else going on with the resurgence of the movie theater. We live in an era where you can stream almost anything to your TV at any time. You can buy a 50" TV for dirt cheap. Movies can be rented three months after they hit theaters. Why would anybody spend \$10-12 for a movie ticket, then buy refreshments at 10x what they cost at home, when you can have virtually the same experience at home not too long from now? You can argue that it's the excitement of being the first to see a film. You can also point to fans who are really excited about this new movie and can't wait to see this movie in particular.

But I think one of the key reasons people still go to the movie theater is peace. For two hours, no one is calling you or texting you. The picture fills your vision and you're drawn into this world that's been created. For a couple hours, you're back at 8 years old with Mom or Dad reading you a bedtime story. There's no pause button, nobody trying to get your attention, nothing else you can do but sit and enjoy. In a world that has become nonstop, having peace for 2 hours is worth my \$10, and the movie is just a bonus.

But that peace is fleeting, right? Pretty soon the lights come up and we're back in the real world, a world without superheroes, a world where at best the dishes still have to be done and dinners made and Monday morning and work are right around the corner...and at worse, everything seems to collapse in on us. In parts of the world, what we have is peace in comparison to what they face. Peace about family, about health, about career...it always seems just out of reach.

Easter is the day when true, lasting peace unfurls its banner over the world. Easter is the day when peace becomes tangible and real, when the eternal peace of God enters into this realm. Easter is the day when rest for our souls becomes a reality. Easter is the day when peace is embodied in the man who is more than a man, the son of God, Jesus. Easter is the day when peace wins. The war is over; there will be many battles along the way, but eternal peace with God is assured for all who side with Him.

You see, Easter is many things all at once. Easter is proof that Jesus was telling the truth and He is the sacrificial lamb given to cover the sins of all His people. He is our ransom and redemption to cover the debt of sin to God we cannot pay. Easter is proof that Jesus is the victorious Christ, the promised Messiah who has overcome the world and liberates His people. Easter is proof that Jesus is and should always be our role model in all things; He is the embodiment of every godly virtue. All of those is truly important.

And yet peace is what I want to focus on today because it seems to be the first thing that Jesus wanted us to focus on after His resurrection. Today's passage is after the initial sightings of Jesus in the garden outside His tomb. His first words are ones of reassurance to the women who've come – "don't be afraid." And then when He appears to the disciples, He tells them, "Peace be with you." They go from terrified of punishment like Jesus suffered to astonishment and wonder, and then excitement. Jesus is alive! And once again, Jesus tells them, "Peace be with you." It's important that Jesus would repeat Himself. In the midst of all the excitement, Jesus wants them to have peace.

Jesus breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” They are given the power of forgiveness. Jesus is giving them the means to have permanent peace. Even once He’s gone, because they have the Holy Spirit, they can have peace. Not temporary peace, not a truce in the war with the world’s ways (as all of them will eventually experience), but the peace that we can only have from knowing that God is with us, God loves us, and God wants us.

Now I want to take a slightly different look at Thomas. We all know Thomas as “the doubter,” but that’s easy for us to say. It’s easy for the other disciples to say, because they were all there! They don’t have the issue of doubting because it was never an issue for them. When Thomas comes back and all the guys are like, “Jesus is alive!,” what is he supposed to think? He’s been hanging out with this crew for the better part of three years; there’s a level of trust established. And yet we’re talking the impossible here. It’s easier to believe that Jesus wasn’t raised from the dead than to take someone’s word for it, even someone you know and believe. We know that’s true even today.

What Thomas is missing is peace. While he’d love to believe, until he sees Jesus with his own eyes and can touch His wounds and verify it’s him, he won’t be at peace. He could have just gone with the flow; he could have pretended with his friends. But Thomas is honest. He isn’t going to say he’s at peace with Jesus’ resurrection when he’s not. He wants proof.

And thankfully for him, Jesus gives it to him. And what does Jesus do when He suddenly appears among them in a locked room? He tells them, “Peace be with you.” And in His grace, He gives Thomas the peace he so desires. And Thomas, seeing Jesus alive and well and standing there, exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” His peace is so deep, he is the first one to get the deepest mystery – that Jesus really is God in the flesh come to us, the Son of the Father.

Jesus says something very telling: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” He’s saying that for our benefit and the benefit of the billions who have come to faith on the word of others passed down generation to generation. The blessing from God, the gift, isn’t just Jesus. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, our redeemer and Lord; we have hope only because of Him. But the blessing of God is that despite the fact that we’ve never seen Him, we trust in Him, we believe Him, we love Him. The blessing is the peace we have that Jesus has taken away our sin and put us on the path to glory, to eternal life with Him. That gift of peace in Jesus is from God. We can’t find it on our own. God gives it to us as well.

Where is your peace today? Jesus promises peace to all those who will follow after Him, who will trust in Him as Savior and live as people guided by His Spirit. Just listen to a few passages, all of them the very words of Jesus. Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” John 14:27 – “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” John 16:33 – “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Listen to the promises of peace from Paul. Throughout his letters and the letters of all the New Testament writers, God is called “the God of peace.” Romans 5:1 – “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Romans 8:6 – “If the Holy Spirit controls your mind, there is life and peace.”

And then a definition of Easter and peace from him in Ephesians 2:14-20: “For Jesus himself is our peace, who has made the two one [Jews and Gentiles], and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility [between them], by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”

In His death, Jesus brought peace between God and everyone who would believe. He brought together the believing Jew and the believing Gentile into one family, bringing peace where there was once nothing but anger and hostility. He makes us brothers and sisters, and not only that, as Paul says in Romans 8:17, we are “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if we share in His sufferings.” We aren't promised an easy road, but we are promised peace – an eternal peace that will never go away.

Where is your peace today? Because every form of peace we can find in this world is going to fade. The movie last a couple hours and then we're back in the sunlight facing our problems. We can try to find peace in pleasures, some more damaging than others, some less moral than others, but none of them last. We can even try to find peace in the best things, in home, in family, in friends. Yet all of them will inevitably disappoint. We know because we disappoint others, right? No matter how wonderful they are, they won't bring us the peace we're looking for. Because God has put it in our hearts to search after Him, and as the ancient church father Augustine put it, “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you, O Lord.”

And sadly, for those who don't find their peace in Christ now, they will not find it later. One of the saddest images in the book of Revelation is that of judgment on those who are unbelievers, who follow their own ways and oppose God. We are used to pictures of fire and torment, which are not off the mark. But what's most striking from Revelation 14:11 is simply this: “There is no rest day or night.” It's a horrible picture. But the truth is, you cannot have rest unless you know the God who embodies life and peace and rest. You cannot have peace in your heart if you are still at war with the God who made you.

Where is your peace today? Is it in Jesus? Maybe you wonder about the death and resurrection of Jesus, if they can possibly be real, and you don't have peace about that. It's hard to believe in something that's only happened once in human history. There's an insert in your bulletin from Lee Strobel, once an atheist whose journalistic investigations into the Bible made him a firm believer. I encourage you to take a free copy of his book, *The Case For Christ*, home with you today. If you'd like a copy and we don't have enough, we'll get you one.

There is no better attested event in the ancient world than the death and resurrection of Christ. Based on the eyewitness testimony, the thousands of copies of written documentation of the gospels available to us, and even the numerous hostile sources that discuss Jesus and His followers as a nuisance or a threat, the wars of ancient history that we consider as fact have less evidence than the resurrection of Jesus. Most major historical figures have less written about them and less attesting to their lives than Jesus. The only reason we doubt the truth of Jesus is that it requires the belief in a supernatural resurrection – and because the truth is too good.

The truth is too good because we do not have to earn salvation. We do not have to be good people. Anyone who is willing to confess that they are a sinner, that their only hope for peace is in the peace of Christ, that desires to follow Christ instead of the world, we are forgiven. We are given the Holy Spirit, and we are given peace. And today, if you have never seriously given your life over to Christ, do it today. You may have spent your whole life going to church, but it's your way of being good. Give that up today and do what Jesus asks – turn to Him, give your life over to Him, and become a follower. And you will have peace. As we close today, we'll say a prayer together, and there will be a chance to give your life to Him. I'd encourage you to pray that with me.

As we close this morning, I wanted to talk briefly about something everyone's been talking about that's not the movies – the great fire that took down a major portion of the Notre Dame cathedral. I've been amazed about the number of friends of mine who've been there over the years who shared their pictures on Facebook this week. It's been called a great tragedy, and while thankfully the whole building didn't burn down, it was awful to see.

The cathedral was built as a monument to the majesty and magnitude of God. It was built to make you feel small, to help you understand the greatness of God in comparison to us. They're going to have a hard time rebuilding the structure because there literally aren't trees on Earth as tall as the ones they cut down to use for its frame. And we do sometimes need to be reminded that God is so much greater than us and as the King of all creation, He deserves our admiration and respect and worship.

But Easter isn't about monumental cathedrals. It's not about our puniness and our low standing before God, that we were made out of the dust. Easter is the day when God raises us up with Christ, when we become new creations in Him, where we are made part of the family, not because we are good but because God is good. Easter reminds us that God wins, that no matter what happens in this life, we can have peace now and forever. As much as we might enjoy the stories, we don't need superheroes to come swooping down to our rescue. We already have one, one who has not only fought the powers of sin and death and darkness but has overcome them. Easter is victory day. Believe in Him, trust Him, accept Him, live for Him, and it will be your victory day too.