

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 14, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

THIRD SUNDAY of EASTER

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Philippians 4)*

One: "Rejoice in the Lord always."

All: "Again I will say: Rejoice!"

One: The Lord is good to us and calls to us, that we might be embraced in arms of love.

All: **The God of resurrection is the God of our lives.**

One: Let us serve the Lord with gladness.

All: **Let us worship the Lord in joy.**

***OPENING HYMN** "Christ Is Risen! Shout Hosanna!" GtG 248

1. **Christ is risen! Shout Hosanna!**
Celebrate this day of days!
Christ is risen! Hush in wonder:
all creation is amazed.
In the desert all-surrounding,
see, a spreading tree has grown.
Healing leaves of grace abounding
bring a taste of love unknown.
2. **Christ is risen! Raise your spirits**
from the caverns of despair.
Walk with gladness in the morning.
See what love can do and dare.
Drink the wine of resurrection,
not a servant, but a friend.
Jesus is our strong companion.
Joy and peace shall never end.

(continued...)

**3. Christ is risen! Earth and heaven
nevermore shall be the same.
Break the bread of new creation
where the world is still in pain.
Tell its grim, demonic chorus:
"Christ is risen! Get you gone!"
God the First and Last is with us.
Sing Hosanna, everyone!**

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Music: HYMN TO JOY, Ludwig van Beethoven, 1824; adapt. Edward
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Dear God, we celebrate your victory
in the resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ.
Yet we know that your struggle with sin and evil
is not over, even in us.
You show us the way, but we do not follow.
You have demonstrated yourself trustworthy,
but we still want proof and hedge our bets.
You call us to love, but we love so little.
Have mercy upon us, O God.
Forgive us for not trusting you.
Forgive us for resisting your guidance and your call.
Forgive us for not being very forgiving.
Fill us with your Spirit that we might know the fullness of your life.
Touch us by your love;
and by the power of Christ's resurrection,
raise us up to serve others
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord,
in whose name we pray. Amen.**

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from I John 3)*

One: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children
of God; and that is what we are."
Children of God,
we are claimed by God,
forgiven of our sins,
and set free for love.

(continued...)

Hear that good news.
Embrace that good news.
Live that good news.

All: Alleluia! Thanks be to God!

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING John 20:19-23

JOHN 20:19-23 (New Revised Standard Version+)

¹⁹ *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 Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."* ²⁰ *After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* ²¹ *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* ²² *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "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."*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "Arising to the Challenge" by Pastor Bill Vincent

What a week it had been: the 'high' of Palm Sunday, with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem; the very low 'low' of the crucifixion; then they hear from Mary, "I have seen the Lord." Whew! He's okay. Glad that's over. I can't take much more of that rollercoaster.

Yet, it was not over.

In fact, in some ways, it had only just begun.

For Jesus appears to them to confirm his presence, to assure them he is alive. And then he commissions them.

There is more. There is work to be done, a message to proclaim.

-From being shattered, to being restored.

-From a life that is questionable, to a life full of purpose.

-Where lives that are empty become full.

*Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ... again,
"Peace be with you. ..."*

Peace: we like it; we like the sound of it. And maybe even after all this excitement, we might like a little "peace and quiet."

But the peace Jesus offers is not necessarily like the peace the world knows or speaks of or seeks.

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as
the world gives." (John 14:27 NRSV)*

The peace Jesus gives befuddles the world. In many ways it is a peace that goes against what the world thinks of as peace. A peace that is not the absence of conflict, but indeed goes to the heart of the conflict to reconcile and to bring deep healing. Not the absence of turmoil and turbulence, but the calm even in the midst of the storm.

For remember: the word of peace comes from one who was crucified. Peace, spoken of by one whose hands and feet still bear the imprint of the nails driven into his flesh.

*Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said
this, he showed them his hands and his side.*

William Percy addresses this tension in his hymn, "They Cast Their Nets in Galilee":

**Contented, peaceful fisher[folk],
Before they ever knew
The peace of God that filled their hearts
Brimful, and broke them too.
Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,
Homeless, in Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teeming net,
Head down was crucified.
The peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife closed in the sod [of death].
Yet, brothers [and sisters], pray for but one thing --
The marvelous peace of God.**
(William Alexander Percy, 1924)

That seeming contradiction is resolved in the presence of their Lord – literally.

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

For it is in his presence that they – and we – experience this peace. His presence, that we can claim and acknowledge whatever the circumstances. His presence, that quietens our hearts even though the world about us is in turmoil. His presence, that grants us strength, calm, and serenity, even when we stand on the very threshold of death.

It is that "*peace of God, which surpasses all understanding*" that Paul could write about, even as he sat in prison (Philippians 4:7).

And Jesus had said,

*"I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face
persecution. But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world!" (John 16:33)*

"Peace be with you," he said.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

We are sent. We’re not called to just sit and do nothing; we are sent with a job to do. Maybe not the same place as we are here and now. But sent, to go somewhere.

Of course, being sent also includes acknowledgment of the authority of the one who sends us: he is our Lord and Master; we are his disciples and witnesses.

As Thomas would put it, *“My Lord and my God!”* (John 20:28) Yes!

And as the one in whose name we witness, he has the authority to send us where he will. It may be across the sea; it may be across the driveway. It may be to another country; it may be to another neighborhood. It may be to people who speak a different language; it may be to people who speak the same language. It may be to people outside this congregation; it may be to someone inside this congregation. It may be to someone we don't know; it may be to someone we know only too well.

He sends us to share this message of his peace. He sends us to share the good news of his resurrection. He sends us to share his love and to embody his presence.

“I send you,” he says.

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Receiving the Holy Spirit: also referred to as the Advocate, the Comforter.

A reminder that, even as we are sent – and yes, that may be scary – we are not on our own: we have a helper.

And we can experience peace, even in the midst of persecution, trials, resistance, obstacles, because of the working of the Holy Spirit in our midst, making Christ's presence with us real.

We can dare to allow ourselves to be sent, and we can go as Christ’s disciples and ambassadors with courage, because we know the Holy Spirit goes with us to help us on our way and guide us on the path.

"Breathe on me, Breath of God," we sing,
fill me with life anew,
that I may love what thou dost love,
and do what thou wouldst do.

(“Breathe on Me, Breath of God,” words by Edwin Hatch, 1886)

This Spirit is the power of God with us: the power of God to create and re-create; the power of God to transform and change; the power of God to upset our neatly ordered lives on our way to obedience and service and life.

And the Spirit has its work cut out for it in regards to the fourth, and final, aspect of this commissioning of the disciples – and of us – by Christ. For

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Forgiveness: in many ways where the rubber meets the road – and it burns.

One of the most impactful examples of forgiveness in recent years is that of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Following years of apartheid, with its systemic

violence and dehumanization of the African population, that government fell and a new one was established, alongside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,

a mixture of confessing, investigating charges, determining reparations and conducting amnesty hearings – in the presence of family and friends of victims – for those who tell the whole truth about their activities. ... built on the belief in the power of truth to lead to true reconciliation. (Robert H. Bullock, Jr., editor, “‘Forgiveness and Reconciliation Are Costly...’” April 20, 1998 issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, p.10)

One picture that is indelibly etched in my mind, is that of Bishop Desmond Tutu in tears over the things he was hearing in the Commission. But in that hearing, and in and through that pain, and that confession, there was forgiveness and reconciliation and healing.

Yes, forgiveness is hard. And we’re not very good at it. But it is also at the very core of our mission, ministry, and community.

And as John Purdy points out, the consequences of not forgiving are also hard. Following a story of a family torn apart by a lack of forgiveness, Purdy writes,

Where forgiveness is resisted, not only families are at risk: Christian congregations will likewise be destroyed if members cannot learn to forgive one another. Disagreements don’t destroy churches; the inability or unwillingness of members to forgive one another ruins churches. (John C. Purdy, *Blessed Are You: The Beatitudes of Jesus in Scripture and in Life*, Resource Book, The Kerygma Program, p.29)

Forgiveness is hard. Forgive the person who stabbed you in the back and walked away with no remorse? Forgive the drunk driver who killed your daughter? Forgive the suicide bomber who destroys innocent lives? Forgive someone like a Hitler?

C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, addresses this issue when he writes,

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive, as we had during World War II. And then, to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger. It is not that people think this too high and difficult a virtue; it is that they think it hateful and contemptible. “That sort of talk makes me sick,” they say. And half of you already want to ask me, “I wonder how you’d feel about forgiving the Gestapo if you were a Pole or a Jew?”

So do I. I wonder very much. ... I am not trying to tell you in this book what I could do – I can do precious little – I am telling you what Christianity is. I did not invent it. And there, right in the middle of it, I find “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.104)

I think it is significant when and where – how – Jesus says these words.

He speaks of forgiveness in the midst of those who betrayed him, denied him, and abandoned him. He had much to forgive – and he did. The disciples had much to be forgiven – and they were. Perhaps in that experience of being forgiven they learned how to forgive and were more willing themselves to forgive.

And notice too when he speaks of forgiveness:

-After the crucifixion: the pivotal point of God's offer of forgiveness. After he, the sacrificial lamb, had been offered up for the forgiveness of the world. As John the Baptist alluded, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29)

-After the resurrection: an event that defied logic. It was beyond imagining. Yet, here he was. After people had done all they could to dispose of him and get rid of him, here he was – somehow. Perhaps with him standing there – he whom they had seen die, yet now, somehow (they didn't know how) standing in their midst – maybe now they could believe in the possibility of seemingly impossible forgiveness...and embrace that new possibility.

In the resurrection – in the presence of their Resurrected Lord – they experienced a renewal of hope: a hope that was alive and tangible; a hope that carried over into their efforts at forgiveness...and ours as well.

He stood in their midst, and stands in our midst, too. As he is risen, so in him we, too, might rise to new life; and rise to the challenge of life in him,

- knowing the peace that “passes all understanding” – peace in his presence;
- embracing his call: being sent to continue his ministry, to embody his presence;
- receiving the Holy Spirit and allowing the Spirit to work in and through us;
- offering the grace and the living of true forgiveness: the true forgiveness that we ourselves have experienced in him.

***HYMN** “Breathe on Me, Breath of God” GtG 286

1. **Breathe on me, Breath of God;
fill me with life anew,
that I may love what thou dost love,
and do what thou wouldst do.**
2. **Breathe on me, Breath of God,
until my heart is pure,
until with thee I will one will,
to do and to endure.**
3. **Breathe on me, Breath of God,
till I am wholly thine,
until this earthly part of me
glows with thy fire divine.**
4. **Breathe on me, Breath of God,
so shall I never die,
but live with thee the perfect life
of thine eternity.**

Words: Edwin Hatch, 1878

Music: TRENTAM, Robert Jackson, 1888

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**God the Holy Spirit
fulfills the work of reconciliation in human life.
The Holy Spirit creates and renews the church
as the community in which people
are reconciled to God and to one another.
The Spirit enables people to receive forgiveness
as they forgive one another
and to enjoy the peace of God
as they make peace among themselves.
In spite of their sin,
the Spirit gives people power
to become representatives of Jesus Christ
and his gospel of reconciliation to all.**

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PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Pour out your blessing, O Lord...
All: ...send us your **Spirit of peace.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Contemporary)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Holy God, we give you thanks and praise
for the bounty of your grace:
for light and life and love,
and – above all –
the presence of the living Lord among us.
By your Spirit who breathes within us,
strengthen our faith,
use our gifts,
and work in our lives
to bear witness to the resurrection of Christ our Lord,
in whose name we pray. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “The Spirit Sends Us Forth to Serve” StF 2241

- 1. The Spirit sends us forth to serve;
we go in Jesus' name
to bring glad tidings to the poor,
God's favor to proclaim.**
- 2. We go to comfort those who mourn
and set the burdened free;
where hope is dim, to share a dream
and help the blind to see.**
- 3. We go to be the hands of Christ,
to scatter joy like seed
and, all our days, to cherish life,
to do the loving deed.**
- 4. Then let us go to serve in peace,
the gospel to proclaim.
God's Spirit has empowered us;
we go in Jesus' name.**

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Music: LAND OF REST, U.S.A. folk melody. *Public Domain*

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

All: ...Amen.

One: For Christ is risen!

All: He is risen indeed!

POSTLUDE

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