



## **May 31, 2020 - Together in One Place**

**Given by Rev. Mattei**

Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3-13; John 20:19-23

Today's Scriptures tell us of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in the locked upper room would have had its own spiritual challenges in "normal" times. It is even more problematic now during the pandemic. I do not mean problematic in terms of the level of difficulty in understanding. I mean it in terms of life application.

A few months ago we would have heard this passage differently and perhaps we would have found an easy way to understand what the disciples were going through. After all, we all experience fear in our life and at times we find it expedient to play it safe and lock the door of our hearts until we find the strength, by the grace of God, to go out there into the world and do our best at loving our neighbor. Up until a few months ago, we would have been all in the same room and it would have been easier to experience the energy of the Spirit of Jesus breathing on all of us and sending us into the world to bring his word of peace and forgiveness.

Not today. Today is different. We are not in the same physical room; indeed we cannot be. This is not because we do not want to. As a matter of fact, I hear you longing for the time when we will be able to gather together as a family and worship our risen Lord. When that time comes, it will be different: physical distancing will wisely still be enforced, no handshakes, no hugs, no normal way of partaking of Holy Communion. Lots of joy at being together and lots of sadness mixed together for the grief of having to relinquish what used to be. Baptisms, funerals, weddings, and laying on of hands...all will have to happen from afar and with the due precautions.

We are emotionally drained and spiritually disoriented not knowing what tomorrow will bring and how to adapt to the new normal. But this unsettled feeling, this un-knowing, this disorientation can be a blessing in disguise. It can be a springboard for grace. Truly we need to remember the words of the God of Israel: "See, I am doing all things new." Our God, as experienced by our ancestors, is a God who is able to create out of chaos, and is able to separate the water that is above the skies and that which is below; who is able to set limits to the oceans so they would not overcome the land; who gives us the sun to regulate the day and the moon to brighten the night. God is the One who gives us the seasons, flesh and bones and breath to live, the fruits of the earth, creativity, and ingenuity. Our God populates our life with the joy of companions, the riches of animals, and the splendor of beauty. Our God calls us to life together, not a life without pain but a life of freedom and courage in God's Presence.

God affirms that message, again and again, even today in our present circumstances. In fact, because of our circumstances we find ourselves closer to the experience of the first disciples in



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that upper room. That message comes to us anew on this Day of Pentecost, and it comes this way: God is Peace, and this Peace is with us, always present, always available.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine the joy of the disciples at hearing that Peace is with them: no blame for what had just happened, no condemning judgment of their betrayal, no retaliation for their abandonment but a clean slate, a do-over, a blessing of renewed friendship, a message of hope through forgiveness, and a mandate to tell the world. Jesus' peace does not compare with the peace the world can offer (John 14:27); it's a peace that provides solace in the face of persecution, a promise of new possibilities, and confidence in Jesus' ability to overcome "the world" (16:33). (In this Gospel, "the world" usually indicates a hostile and ignorant response to the truth that Jesus embodies.)

With this message, there is no thought of a God who punishes humanity because of our many sins. There is no wrath of God we need to face. God, our Peace, is already aware of how much pain we are capable of inflicting on ourselves and each other. The suffering our sin causes is already our punishment. That's where the judgment of God is made manifest, and the judgment is this: whatever you are doing that is life alienating carries its own intrinsic separation from the Source of Life and this is not good for you. Separated from the Source of Life through your sin, you simply perish. That is the wrath of God: not that God strikes us for our unfaithfulness but our own self-inflicted pain is God's wrath. The present pandemic (or any other natural disaster) is a product of the forces of nature but have we somehow contributed to it and caused our own affliction?

Recalling the moment when God breathed life into the first person in Genesis 2:7 (cf. Ezekiel 37:9), Jesus breathes the Spirit of life into (not merely "on") his followers in John 20:22. A new creation is afoot. This creation does not replace "the world." It engages it. And the terms of engagement are the promises of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. In fact, in John's Gospel, Jesus talks about sin as unbelief, the unwillingness or incapacity to grasp the truth of God manifested in him. To sin is to remain estranged from God. The consequence of such a condition is ongoing ignorance and resistance. Sin in John is not about moral failings; primarily it is an inability or refusal to recognize God. The disciples can set people free from that state of affairs. They can be a part of seeing others come to believe in Jesus and what he discloses and, therefore, enjoy a resurrected life. Failure to bear witness, Jesus warns, will result in the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the book of Judges 6 especially v. 24



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opposite: a world full of people left unable to grasp the knowledge of God. That is what it means to "retain" people's sins.

Receiving the Spirit, the church receives Jesus in a new way. That is the Easter promise of resurrected life: through the Spirit and in Jesus we can be with the Father, we can dwell in the Holy Trinity. And so the church receives Jesus' own capacity to make God manifest, bringing light to the world.

We are more apt at singing "Give me Jesus."<sup>2</sup> rather than praying "Come, Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> And yet, it is the Spirit Jesus has been promising all along.<sup>4</sup> The risen Lord even rebuked the Maddalaine not to cling to him in the garden for he had not yet ascended to the Father. This is because no matter how close we get to him, Jesus is an historical person and, therefore, always external, whereas the Spirit is within us. To put it another way, it's the choice between having Jesus or being Jesus.

It is the Spirit that makes us Jesus, makes us the body of Christ. It is the Spirit that gives us life and fills us with love. It is not enough for us to be with Jesus; we must become Jesus, and we can only do that with the power of the Spirit. Can you see now the mission we have been given? Once Peace is with us we know the joy of being with the Father. Wouldn't we want the same joy for the world? That is why we are sent to forgive and reconcile people to God's plan.

But what will that look like now as we navigate this new reality in the midst of the pandemic? What signs of love can we show? How can we love people from a distance and with our masks on? But that's exactly the point, isn't it? We show love in the most proper way we can even though we are resisting the temptation of responding to our need for closeness, for human touch, for singing together, for holding each other. At this moment, the best way to show love, consideration, and care, the best way to honor one another is by respecting our boundaries and refraining from passing judgment on one another. Sometimes, we show love by staying away from each other and not putting ourselves in the position of unknowingly harming those at risk. Sometimes, we show love not by doing but by not doing. We are called now to be for one another what we never imagined we needed to be: a different kind of presence. Instead of pretending that all is well and go back to what was normal only a few months ago, let us get into

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<sup>2</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) #770

<sup>3</sup> <https://vineyardusa.org/library/a-brief-history-of-the-prayer-come-holy-spirit/>

<sup>4</sup> John 14:15-26; John 16:7-11



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the habit of asking how we can be loving and helpful to one another now given the present situation.

Could it be that the first words of forgiveness and reconciliation need to be spoken to those closest to us, in our family and in our church?

Let us pray.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth. O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.