**John 20:19-31 (esp.19-23)** April 28, 2019

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 *John 20:19 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!” 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.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

 Easter Sunday was last week. A day of joy, of assurance that eternal life is ours! In the sermon reading, do you remember the picture God set before us? God used a picture to explain heaven so we fallen people living in a fallen world can understand. God said about heaven, “Heaven’s going to be like… a… feast! Not a meal, a feast!” We like that idea. Heaven is like the best ever all-you-can-eat buffet. Maybe that is the inspiration for church potlucks. But there is one thing about potlucks that bothers me: Too many choices! I never get to try all the things I’d like to try.

 This week’s reading is sort of like an overstocked potluck. In these twelve verses there is so much good stuff, that we just can’t explore it all. Jesus is raised, Thomas doubts, the disciples testify, the Holy Spirit is given. It teaches about faith, Holy Scripture, sin, Christology and more. There is so much good stuff here!

 I remember hearing—I don’t know if it was true or not so it probably wasn’t—I remember hearing about a pastor who once preached for an entire year on a single sermon text. Every Sunday, same reading with a different focus. He felt that there was so much in that one Scripture that he just couldn’t put it down. You are probably glad to hear that I am not planning to do the same thing. But if there were a Bible reading that I could go on about for a couple months, this one from John 20 is a candidate.

 I say that because when we get to the end of this sermon, a few of you are going to think, “Well, I was really hoping pastor was going to talk about this or that from the reading.” Just remember, you can’t have a helping of everything at a potluck.

 Today I would like to concentrate on what Christ keyed in on with his very first word to his disciples. Let us see Christ guiding them and us to

**De-Stressing in Distressing Times**

 Some seem to think that we live in especially stressful times. Recently one college bound teen-ager asked her mom how she, her mom, had dealt with all the stress of being a teenager. Her mom thought about it, and thought, “You know what, a generation ago, I don’t think we got all stressed out. Oh sure, we got nervous about stuff. But not anxiety.”

 Do an internet search on “Are people more anxious than they used to be” and you will find a lively debate. Many people – and learned people too, not just people who like to type in ALL CAPS – people with degrees in this sort of stuff are in on the debate about why it seems we have so much more anxiety than a generation or two ago. I’m not going to debate if our times are more stressful—they may well be. Nor am I here to talk about the reasons. Anxiety has been around since the beginning and will be till the end. Today, Jesus tells us the starting place of dealing with that anxiety, whatever the level, whatever the cause, whenever the time.

 Now it would be simplistic to say that you will get over all your anxiety and stress issues this afternoon if you just follow Scripture’s advice. Some could, but not all. But think of it this way, have you ever seen one of those spiral wishing wells that charities use to gather coins. You put a coin in a slot and it rolls down and around, starting with wide circles and getting to smaller and smaller circles closer to the center? In a way that is how God’s Word works. As we handle and listen to God’s word more and more, our thoughts and actions take ever-narrowing circles closer and closer to God’s will. And I truly believe that in the same way, following Jesus’ words today and taking them seriously will help us to live ever more calm, less anxious, lives in Christ Jesus.

 On the first Easter, Jesus’ disciples were experiencing excruciating anxiety. ***“On the evening of that first day of the week… the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear.”*** They felt the stress of simple survival.

 Some of us have known that sort of anxiety. Sometimes it started sorrowfully young. Your parents sent you off to school, with high hopes that you would be trained and made ready for life in the world. Instead you found yourself victimized by little monsters no older than you; “bullying” we call it. How terrible to feel anxiety so young! Survival stress happens with a marriage partner who has no concept of marriage as a partnership. Instead of a loving mutually beneficial relationship, it becomes an issue of getting what one can out of it. How sorrowful to see God’s blessing turned into an anxiety-ridden curse. Social media, with its ever more effective ways of slamming and shaming people, can impose high levels of stress, dehumanizing its victims. How accurately the Bible, in another place, describes these kinds of bare survival anxiety when it says, *“You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day… In the morning you will say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and in the evening, ‘If only it were morning!’—because of the terror that will fill your hearts”* (Dt 28:66-67).

 The disciples were in the middle of that anxiety. Night was falling on the day we think of as the first Easter. Jesus had risen. He had been pleased for reasons that God knows, to only show himself to a handful of women at this point. These women in turn told Jesus’ closest disciples. Those Eleven then did what many men through the ages have done: they dismissed it as “women’s talk” (cf. Luke 24:11,22-23). But the onset of evening has a way of affecting people. As the sun dropped, they stopped thinking about what the women had said that Sunday morning and thought about what they had seen on Friday afternoon. Crowds shouting that their teacher be crucified. Their teacher tortured and executed. Religious authorities sneering at him as he died. Romans authorities unwilling to intervene. Would the enemies who murdered their leader want to finish off the followers too?

 As the skies darkened the terrors of they had witnessed two days earlier returned to their minds. These disciples knew the anxiety of wanting to both run and hide at the same time. So they slid the bolt on a door—that couldn’t keep even a single determined thug out. But what else could they do?

 Into the middle of that anxiety Jesus comes. He stands there. He speaks a word powerful enough to bring tears to the eyes of those on the edge of breaking down, “Peace.” Oh, dear Jesus, how they wanted peace! Oh, how dear Jesus wanted them to have peace.

 Mother hears her five-year-old son crying out in the night and knows that it is a nightmare. So she rushes to the boy’s bedroom. She gently and quickly wakes him out of that frightening dream world. She wakens him to reality, to assure them with her presence. “Stop worrying. Mom is here. Everything is alright. Calm down and go back to sleep.”

 And so Jesus appears to his anxious disciples. As much as they need a solution to their anxiety, he desires to give it. He appears among them and assures them of peace. Not peace with the hostile world outside their doors. Peace with him, Jesus. Peace with their heavenly Father. Like the mother waking her child, Jesus directs his disciples to the ultimate reality. Not a wicked world’s hatred (which is very real), but a heavenly Father’s love (which is more enduring).

 The living Christ Jesus takes their eyes off the things of this world. He lifts their eyes to heaven and tells them to ask themselves whose approval they are seeking. Are they seeking the world’s approval or God’s? Through his appearance and his words he shows them that the reason they are so stressed is because they have forgotten about God’s approval. They have forgotten the truth that *“In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*

 Then Jesus repeats his blessing, ***“Peace be with you.”*** Even as a parent repeats “Wake up. I’m here. It’s ok.” to the dreaming child, so Jesus keeps assuring his disciples until they wake to the reality of the God’s love.

 In their nightmares of anxiety, God would have each and every one of his children remember this truth. Between God and us, there is peace. Christ Jesus died for our sins. Therefore we have God’s acceptance, not for who we are, but for who Christ Jesus was in our place. Therefore our eternal futures are secure. Therefore we know that God will use all things for his purposes, even the horribly bad things that happen in this world.

 There were other stresses, too. By this third day after Jesus’ death the disciples were starting to ask themselves, “What now?” Think about where they found themselves. A few of Jesus’ followers had once been pretty ungodly people, like Matthew the tax collector. But most seem to have been godly people who had given up honorable livelihoods to be Jesus’ followers. They had given it all up to follow Jesus for three years. Three of their prime years, years when you have to advance, to get ahead while you have the vigor of youth. They had given that up to follow Jesus, and now he was dead (so they thought). Now they would have to do a reset, start at the bottom of the totem pole. They surely lamented in their hearts, as did those two on the road to Emmaus, *“We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel…”* (Lk 24:21). They had given up and lost so much for Jesus!

 What of people who lose things for Christ? Measured by the world’s yardstick, following God often is a loss. We like to think that if we just do what God wants somehow magically everything turns out better, more profitable for us. Not always. I know that God uses all things for the good of those who love him. But sometimes what God considers our good, is not our first choice. I think of an American missionary we knew in Africa. His ministry in Africa ended specifically because he would not bribe a public official. Suddenly they had 30 days to leave the country or be deported. There was another Christian who said that when he and his wife thought about upgrading to a new car, they ended up downgrading. They added the difference in car payments to their monthly offering. Contrary to the preaching of those televangelists on TBN, God didn’t give him a pay bonus to get the vehicle upgrade anyway. But that didn’t matter to them; they gave.

 Serving our loving Savior does cause stress. You have to make choices, choices that may cost you money, put you at a competitive disadvantage, earn you disfavor.

 Into the middle of that anxiety Jesus comes. He stands there. He speaks a word powerful enough to bring tears to the eyes of those on the edge of breaking down, “Peace.” Oh, dear Jesus, how we want that peace! OH, how dear Jesus wants to give us peace. So he reminds us. “Peace be to you.”

 Then Jesus tells us that this message of peace is not just for us. ***“‘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.’ ”*** “Peace for you. And you. And you.”

 Jesus reminds us that the most important thing in life is not the stuff in life or even life itself. In one word Jesus teaches us that the first step in De-Stressing in a Distressing World is to remember this simple word, the first word that the Savior spoke to his worried, harried, anxious followers: ***“Peace.”***  Amen.