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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Third Sunday of Easter, April 14, 2024
Luke 24:35-48

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the start of today's Gospel lesson, the eleven disciples are huddled together in one room with the doors shut. Luke's account does not outright say that they are *hiding*, but if you compare this story with the parallel passage in John's Gospel, it seems pretty clear that the disciples are not willing to show their face around town.

There are two types of people in this world. People who face their problems head on and people who hide from them. The first type is quite rare. The disciples, like most of us, seem to belong to the second category.

And they do, after all, have a big problem.

Their problem is that their Lord has been crucified, and they are devastated. At the same time, they are terrified that the same authorities who put Jesus to death might come after them too. Not only that, but I think it's safe to say they also feel a crushing guilt for having abandoned Jesus on the cross, with Peter probably feeling the worst of all for having denied Him too. And then there are rumors that actually, Jesus is alive again, but the disciples don't know if they can believe a group of hysterical women. And even if it IS true, that Jesus is alive, that might mean that they have an even bigger problem, because who knows how Jesus is going to react to His followers' cowardice and unbelief? After all, they had once pledged to die with Jesus (at least Peter and Thomas did), and now here they are, hunkered down in a locked chamber after having run for their lives the moment He was arrested.

We shouldn't be too hard on the disciples. How many of us would have done any better?

In fact, it's an all too familiar response, isn't it? Most of us belong to that second category of people, the type of people who find it hard to face up to their problems. When we are faced by something we don't know how to deal with, we too often hide away in a locked room. Metaphorically speaking.

We do this in a variety of ways.

Some people live in denial. Deep down they know that they have a problem. Maybe they spend too much, procrastinate too much, lose their temper too much, drink too much, eat too much. Maybe there's something they need to face, such as an issue with their spouse or their kids, but they would rather pretend the problem doesn't exist. Maybe there is something in their life they know they need to change, but they are too afraid to come to terms with this need and so they suppress those feelings and let them fester away in a deep dark place inside.

Some people live with guilt that they haul around like a heavy load. It could be a truly wicked deed from their past for which they were never caught. Part of them wants the sweet relief that comes with confession, but they are too afraid to face the consequences. Others simply feel the nagging guilt that comes with being a human being in this fallen world. They remember the part they have played in failed relationships, the hurtful things they have said, the times they failed to be kind or helpful or honest. The times they have let someone down, maybe over and over again. They don't see a way to make amends. They see no point in opening old wounds. Or they are convinced there will be no forgiveness either way. And so, they keep their guilt safely secured in that locked room.

Some people live in fear of conflict. They let other people mistreat them or cause strife unchallenged, because they are unwilling to be confrontational. They do not speak up when they ought to. They do not protest in the face of injustice, because they fear the consequences of getting involved. They appease wrongdoers in hopes of keeping peace, but whatever peace they do secure comes at a cost. Like the cowardly disciples, they hide away while the wicked do their worst.

Many people in this world live with fears or anxieties of all kinds. Anxiety about the future, their health, their finances, the outcome of the next election, the safety of their children, the climate, and a host of other potential troubles. They live in terror of death itself. The troubles may be real, and the fear may be rational, to an extent, but they let their anxiety cripple them to the point of inaction. Instead of doing what they can to be proactive or manage their emotions, they too cower away in that locked room. And their lives are the worse for it.

The reality of being sinful people living in a sinful world is that we find ourselves overwhelmed by problems, not always but often of our own making, and like the proverbial ostrich, we would rather stick our head in the sand

than face them head on. We say we want peace, but we are willing to accept counterfeit versions based on self-delusions. As sinners, we are capable of an extraordinary degree of deception and denial, but only if we bar the doors and shutter the windows and hide from Truth as best we can.

And so it was, three days after the crucifixion, that the disciples were assembled in that locked room with no idea what to do next. How to fix what was broken. How to pick up the pieces.

Thankfully for them, and for us, locked doors are no match for Jesus. He appeared among them, and they were terrified. I think they might have believed they were hiding from the Romans or the Sanhedrin, but they were also hiding from the Lord Himself, because they know how badly they have messed things up and they are terrified about what Jesus is going to say to them. Has He returned as a vengeful ghost to punish them for their cowardice and weakness?

No, the first words out of Jesus's mouth are "Peace be with you."

Shalom is a standard Middle Eastern greeting, but when Jesus says it, is a true declaration of peace. "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts," He asks. I am here in the flesh, He shows them. He eats a piece of fish to show that He is truly resurrected as He had told them He would be.

What we mean by peace in this fallen world is always temporary. It is the absence of violence, a tenuous period of quiet before the next storm blows in, a tranquility built on a house of cards that could crashing down at any moment.

What Jesus means by peace is the Real Thing and only He can provide it. That is what He has done by dying and rising to life. He has fulfilled the Scriptures and defeated all the enemies of peace: sin, death, and the devil, and now nothing, least of all locked doors or human frailty, can stand in His way.

When Jesus says, "Peace be with you," He says, I forgive you. I restore you to fellowship with Me. The men who crucified Me, the followers who betrayed Me, none of them have the final word. I do, and My word is grace and comfort and the promise of new life. The things that terrify you, that weigh you down, that keep you from loving and living as God intended, are destined for destruction. See My hands and My feet, see that I am truly here with you, and believe.

It took the disciples a long time to understand what Jesus was about. Even after living with Him, watching Him perform miracles and hearing Him teach, even after watching Him die without protest and seeing Him appear again in the flesh, they still need help keeping faith. Now Jesus will ascend to the Father, but the Holy Spirit will be with His disciples and be their source of comfort, guidance, and peace.

In His Farewell Address, recorded in the fourteenth chapter of John, Jesus said this: "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14: 26-27)

That is a message for us too. There are all sorts of troubles in this world. If it's not one thing, it is another. We can run all we want, but we cannot hide for long. We cannot hide from our sin or the sins of others, we cannot hide from disappointment or suffering, and we cannot hide from death. But we can cling to Jesus, and the Holy Spirit will give us a peace that passes understanding.

We also cannot save the *world* from its troubles. We cannot end all wars or put a permanent stop to human misery such as disease, hunger, violence or other maladies. Changing other people is not in our power either. But we can be people of peace who try to be like Jesus and bring some relief of suffering by obeying His commandments and walking in His footsteps. Most importantly, we can point others to our Source of peace. The last thing Jesus says in today's Gospel passage is, "You are witnesses of these things." If the world is to have any hope of peace, it needs Jesus. To have Jesus, it needs the apostolic witness. It needs people of faith who come out of hiding to share the hope of the Gospel. It needs people who reject counterfeit forms of peace in order to lay claim to the Real Thing, the peace that comes only through having the risen Jesus as Lord.

It might be the case that you have been feeling ill at ease about something, or many things. Something is not quite right in your life. It could be a burden you bear, a guilty conscience, a fear, a problem you have been unable to face. Maybe you are worried by what you see in the news, troubled by broken relationships, anxious about the future, struggling with a sin or bad habit, something you know you need to change but can't bring yourself to do. Maybe you are terrified by the prospect of death itself, and so you seek to lose yourself in distractions instead of preparing to meet the Lord.

When we are confronted by our troubles, it is tempting to do what the disciples did and hide. To lock the doors, pull down the shades, and wish the problem away. Or to seek relief in false comforts, things that dull the pain or keep our minds off the truth of our situation.

Praise the Lord that He is mighty and gracious. That He can walk through doors, break down barriers, and bring true peace. The peace that comes from being forgiven yet again, set once again on the path of righteousness, freed from the prisons of our own making, and restored to relationship with God.

When you hear Jesus say, "Peace be with you," take Him at His word. Touch Him and see. Only Jesus grants lasting peace, and He offers it to all who turn to Him.

To Jesus be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.