

“Gifts”

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[1 Peter 1:3-9](#)

[John 20:19-31](#)

Last Sunday was Easter Sunday, and we had well above average attendance here at First Pres. It's the same at churches around the world. I saw one statistic that showed that the average megachurch experiences a 74 percent increase in attendance on Easter Sunday¹. One headline a few years ago said this: “Easter Sunday is the Super Bowl of church attendance.”² Some churches even ramp up the attendance with giveaways. One church gave away \$500 each to a visitor and a member, and doubled its attendance on Easter. Another church gave away 10 cars, 1,000 bags of groceries, and 20,000 stuffed Easter Eggs. My friend Katie Treadway pastors a church in Ohio. She said that she “received an invitation to a local church that is giving away a house to someone who attends their Easter services.” I’m wondering about these promotions for increasing attendance on Easter Sunday, though. Perhaps we should try such giveaways on the Sunday *after* Easter – that’s today. This Sunday always has lower attendance in churches around the world. It even has a nickname, “Low Sunday.” So, I’m grateful for those of you who *are* here today, and glad that you came without the offer of a giveaway to entice you.

We do have gifts to discuss today, however! Perhaps most of you have participated in some sort of a going-away party. Maybe it was for a child going off to college, maybe it was for a colleague moving on, maybe it was for a pastor who was retiring. Very often at these parties, there are gifts given to the person who is going away. Going-away gifts, we might call them. Game

¹ <http://christianstandard.com/2011/04/christmas-or-easter/>

² http://www.al.com/living/index.ssf/2013/03/easter_ranks_first_in_church_a.html

shows on television have a similar concept, where they give “lovely parting gifts” to those who didn’t quite win the big prizes.

In the text for today, Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection. He is soon to ascend to Heaven to, as we say in the Apostles’ Creed, “sit at the right-hand of God the Father almighty.” He is soon to part, but first he has some gifts to give the disciples. Jesus does the “lovely parting gifts” thing in reverse – *He* is the one who is leaving, but He gives the gifts to the disciples – and to us.

The first gift Jesus gives those who would follow Him is *peace*. This is quite a valuable gift. The first thing that Jesus says to the disciples after appearing in their midst in the locked room is “Peace be with you.” Can you imagine? They have left behind everything – families, homes, jobs, their lives as they knew them – to follow Jesus, believing that He is the promised Messiah, though they don’t quite get what that means. And then, suddenly, everything comes to a screeching halt. Jesus is taken away, killed on a cross, and put in a tomb. They remember Jesus saying something about rising on the third day, but that’s a bit too tough to believe, and so they are now hiding behind locked doors, dejected and wondering what to do next. They are far from at peace. Jesus comes to them in the midst of their fear and says, “Peace be with you.” It is a powerful moment, and Jesus repeats that phrase three times in our Gospel reading for today. Peace means so much. In Hebrew, it is a word that perhaps many of us know – *shalom* – and it means “completeness, welfare, and health.” It is a state in which everything is as it should be. Each week during worship, we do what we call “passing the peace.” We always note that it is “the peace of Christ.” It is not *our* peace or *our* family’s peace or *our* country’s peace. We are sharing the peace of our Lord, which only He can give. In another passage in John, Jesus is speaking with the disciples about his forthcoming departure and he tells them, “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.” And then, in this moment of immense fear and uncertainty, Jesus brought the first gift – the gift of

shalom, of peace. It is a gift which He gives us when we are in times of immense fear and uncertainty, as well. Paul calls it “the Peace that passes all understanding.” We speak often of this peace. I usually begin the benediction with “Go forth in *peace* to love and serve the Lord.” It is the Lord’s peace in which we “live and move and have our being,” as Luke put it in Acts. This peace does not depend on anything that we do. It does not depend on how things are going in our jobs, our families, our lives. It supersedes all of those circumstances and is a free gift from our Lord.

The next parting gift that Jesus gives the disciples is the gift of purpose. He says to them a second time “Peace be with you” and then He tells them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” They were huddling behind locked doors, aimlessly biding the hours. After leaving behind their old world, their new world had come crashing down around them. What should they do now? Should they go back to their earlier way of life? Should they run far away from the authorities who had executed Jesus, in case they might come after them next? Jesus came and gave them Peace, calming their fears, and then He sent them out on a mission. They might think that their mission ended with Jesus’ death, but He tells them that it has only just begun. They have so much more to do now. It is up to them to tell the story. It is up to them to tell of their experience with the risen Lord. They have a job to do. They no longer are without purpose, for Jesus is sending them, just as God has sent Him.

But they really can’t do much of their purpose without the third parting gift – Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit and thus provides the ability to do their purpose. The Spirit of God will work in and through us, so that we may accomplish our purpose, for God. The Holy Spirit enabled this scared group of disciples to leave behind the locked room and spread the Word of God. They really weren’t much on their own. Peter had just denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times, in fear. But soon, Peter would be on the streets of Jerusalem, boldly preaching about Jesus, afraid of no one, as we heard in our reading from 1 Peter today. Of all of these disciples, church tradition says that only *one* ended up dying a natural death. They went far and wide to

preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, emboldened by the work of the Holy Spirit. And for this, they were tortured and executed. These are not the same people who were cowering behind a locked door. They were converted by the Holy Spirit into people who were unafraid to spread the Gospel, no matter the cost.

And yes, that includes Thomas. On the Sunday after Easter every year, the Revised Common Lectionary appoints this reading. The Lectionary is a three-year cycle, with few texts repeated during the three years. This text is an exception. Year after year on the Sunday after Easter, we read about the disciple with the unkind nickname. You know it well – for we rarely refer to him without the adjective – “Doubting Thomas.”

A pastor named John Roberts shares a story his grandmother told of a man in west Kentucky around 1900. He never touched a drop of “Demon Rum” – as he called it – except for one memorable occasion. He got roaring drunk, stole a horse and buggy, and raced down the main street of Arlington, Kentucky, all the while singing at the top of his lungs the song, “There’ll be a hot time in the old town tonight!” For the rest of his life, he was known as “Hot Time.” One night and a reputation for a lifetime! It wasn’t fair to call him “Hot Time” all his life, nor is it fair to keep on saying, “Doubting Thomas” for one request on one night.

The Bible doesn’t tell us why Thomas wasn’t there that night when Jesus first appeared to the disciples, or where he might have been. Maybe he was even out searching for Jesus after Mary told them that she had seen Him alive; we just don’t know. The other disciples didn’t seem to believe Mary’s story, either, before seeing Jesus. It wasn’t as if they were out spreading the good news of Jesus’ resurrection or looking for Jesus or doing something productive. They were locked in a room, trembling with fear. For whatever reason, Thomas isn’t there, and so he says he won’t believe until he sees it for himself. He really just wants the same opportunity that the others had! Once he gets that opportunity, he exclaims “My Lord and my God!” This is the highest praise made of Jesus in the New Testament, and it comes from the lips of *Doubting* Thomas. We see it time and

time again that those who use their doubts well become stronger believers. Some choose to use their doubts as an excuse to lead them away. If we instead use our doubts as a reason to ask more questions and seek more answers, we will become stronger in our faith. Francis Bacon said, "If a man will begin in certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties." Some want to pretend that they have no doubts. They are really trying to convince themselves of that, for they think that if they question something, all of their beliefs will come tumbling down. That's why Francis Bacon was right – it's better to start with doubts and work our way toward certainties. If we start out with absolute, rigid beliefs, we give ourselves nowhere to go. There's no way to grow in faith. The only way to go is down. If we believe we have it all figured out and then someday discover we weren't quite right about something, then it is too easy to lose our grasp on everything else. Growth in faith works like growth in everything else. You start small. You start with many doubts, many questions, and you work your way toward more certainties, knowing that some of the questions won't be answered until we see God face-to-face. In the meantime, use your doubts, your questions to lead you to greater faith.

So, today, I have no free house to offer you, no bags of groceries, no cars. But Jesus Christ himself offers us three gifts: peace to calm our fears, a purpose in this world, and the Holy Spirit to provide us what is needed to live a life of faith. Those gifts will last a lot longer than a bag of groceries. Thanks be to God. Amen