



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday April 23rd – Easter I

“Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.”

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

This is not a happy day or a happy week for the disciples of Jesus. Certainly, the week started out well, with their beloved leader making a grand entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and fulfilling yet another prophecy of the Messiah (Zechariah 9:9) in the process. But it didn't take long for that happy week to take a nosedive and turn into what was likely the worst week of their lives. Jesus is betrayed by one of their own, is beaten and mocked mercilessly, they (John notwithstanding) flee like rats from a ship, and Jesus dies a slow and agonizing death between two common thieves on the cross.

And here they are, on the third day after the crucifixion, holed up in somebody's home, practically waiting for their own persecution to begin. The crucifixion isn't ancient history, it was at the start of the weekend. The aura of death still hangs in the air, Jesus's declaration that “*it is finished*” still rings in the wind. And their emotional state is entirely too complex for us to really comprehend. On the one hand, they are grieving and in pain over the loss of their leader and friend. On the other, and we can't shy away from this, they were probably really angry with Him. It seems they threw their lives away to follow Him, and all of His promises were worthless, and their effort and dedication was for naught. C.S. Lewis famously said, “a

man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.” And at this point, at least some of the disciples are grappling with which one of those things their dead friend must either be or have been - Lord, liar, or lunatic? And seeing as He is dead and they never fully grasped the the point of His death and resurrection, one could hardly blame them for considering one of the less flattering options.

And then, out of the blue, Jesus appears in His glorified body. He stands among them in a body that is physical, yet which defies the laws of physics. And he says “*peace be unto you.*” He presents Himself to them and again tells them “*peace be unto you.*” This time it's no mere greeting, but a declaration - My peace is with you. It invokes the first few verses in Genesis; the disciples are formless and empty and darkness is covering them, and just as God said “*let there be light,*” and there was light, Jesus storms the darkness and declares His peace to them, and gives them back their form and mission.

And what a mission He gives them; He tells them that as God the Father sent Him, He now sends them. What a comparison - *“as God the Father sent Me on this mission from Heaven to redeem all of mankind, I likewise send you out into the world to finish the job.”* Never has a greater job been given, in the history of all Creation. Next, John says He breathed on them and said *“Receive ye the Holy Ghost.”* And just as God breathing life into Adam in Genesis gave birth not only to a new thing, but whole new *kind of thing*, Jesus likewise creates something brand new for the world, a whole new creation - the ministerial office of His Church; Holy Orders.

This is really a perfect illustration of how Jesus is indeed fully divine. If He'd been merely fully human, He'd have handled everything entirely differently. He'd have appeared with a flowchart or PowerPoint presentation of how everybody had failed him, as well as a litany of complaints for general apostolic performance for starters. There'd have been stern rebuttals for Peter's threefold denial, and poor Doubting Thomas would have been replaced instantly by Jesus's cousin from Accounts Receivable. Finally, they'd break out into work groups to discuss a strategic rebranding. But no, God the Son returns in grace and forgiveness and love, bidding peace and establishing the Order which for the next two thousand years will build the church, baptize the children, confirm the new believers, consecrate the sacraments, and do all such works as have been laid out for them.

He bursts into their despair, their shame, and their anger towards Him and themselves and thoroughly ruins their pity party. *“Whatever your failings were, my Grace is sufficient to cover them. Whatever your pain and anger may have been, I forgive you; My peace be unto you. I know the absolute worst in you, the darkest parts of your being, but I am putting you to work immediately to build My church and to bring My peace to the entire world. The wheels haven't come off the bus here; in fact, the real adventure is just beginning.”*

These men were failed and empty, and Christ filled that emptiness with the Holy Ghost, and they became more than they ever were. These men became bold, fearless preachers who began preaching repentance and forgiveness and grace to a hostile crowd, and made disciples of them. They were so spiritually emboldened that they took on their own disciples, and were the spark that spread a global ministry of reconciliation, word, and sacrament. These broken men, huddled and waiting for the authorities or zealots to come round them up changed the entire world, with the Holy Ghost in them.

Not every missionary gets on a plane and goes to a far-off land to dig wells. Some missionaries just walk next door. Some go to their local pub for a pint and conversation. The one thing they all have in common is that the devil loves to whisper in their ear that their own sin, their own doubt, their own brokenness, is a hindrance to their ministry and their mission. It is one of the most tragically effective lies the devil tells us, or that we tell ourselves.

But we have something that answers that lie. It's something we get when we confess Christ as saviour, and which is conferred explicitly in the sacrament of confirmation: the Holy Spirit of God in us. And we can draw from Him the things which we don't have and can't produce of ourselves - an everlasting spring of grace, reconciliation, discernment, and holiness. We are lifted up out of our shame and our guilt and our brokenness to be the church, by the Spirit of Him who was lifted up on the cross of Calvary.

The next time you're tempted to keep your faith quiet, or to stay home and not be a local missionary and to miss out on a chance to change the world, remember that it was a defeated and broken band of men who first heard *“Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” Amen*