

SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE ON SUNDAY APRIL 24, 2022

BY THE REVEREND STUART LANGSHAW

Based on John 20:19-24 (Gospel for the Sunday after Easter). Also Anzac Day

Those of you here who served in one of the armed forces may well have known the feeling of being scared for your life. If you have been in the presence of the enemy in a war theatre and you have known that they have been carrying rifles and grenades, you may well have been terrified that the next bullet or burst of shrapnel had your name on it.

That's how Jesus' disciples felt in the days after Jesus' crucifixion. They really were in fear of their lives. They were known to be associates of that crucified man. But their location was secret, their door was locked. Were they safe? Would they live? The next knock on the door could bring their arrest, their torture and their execution. They spoke together only in hushed voices. The slightest unusual sound made their heads whip around to see what it was. Their emotions were as tight as violin strings.

And ... suddenly ... there Jesus was. How it was that he was there they didn't know. Where he had come from they did not know. Their tight emotions and their scared demeanour meant they couldn't say anything. But Jesus spoke. In the voice that a little while earlier had said just one word "Mary," and dispelled all her fears, Jesus now said, "Peace be with you." That was the voice they knew. That was the voice they recognised. That was the voice that dispelled all their fears.

Then Jesus showed them his hands and his side. They were the wounds they knew. They were the wounds they recognized. They were the wounds that authenticated who this man was – it was Jesus – it was their Jesus – and their silence was changed into glad clamour; their tight emotions were released; their hushed voices were changed to glad cries and shouts. But Jesus said again, "Peace be with you." That word "Peace" had brought calm to their fears and worries. That word "Peace" now brought balance to their shouts and joy. That word "Peace" was the first resurrection word from Jesus to the disciples.

In our service of Holy Communion, we share that first resurrection word with each other Sunday by Sunday. "Peace be with you," we say. Oh, it doesn't mean, "How are you going, alright?" even though that's how many people appear to use it. "Peace be with you" means that we wish the other person safety – we wish them a quiet, restful state of mind – wholeness – a life where things are as they should be. It's that beautiful Hebrew word "shalom." To greet one another in peace and with peace is an act of faith, and it should compel us to make that peace more real among us.

But it is even more than that ... it is a priestly blessing that we offer each other. "Peace be with you" is a blessing we pronounce in the name of Jesus, risen from the dead. In pronouncing peace upon each other, in effect we are praying for each other. We are asking God to give peace in all its fullness to our friends in Christ here at Church with us. "Peace be with you" is our prayer that in the people's lives whom we greet, their circumstances may be coloured by God's peace. We can't remove the strains and the stresses that they feel, and we can't cancel the upset in their lives. But we can bring the colour of God's peace to bear on them. At our service even this morning, someone may be feeling emptiness of heart because of the death of a dearly loved friend. Or someone else may feel concerned and uncertain because of the very delicate medical condition of another friend.

To those people we say, "Peace be with you." It's not a hearty slap on the back ... it is a heart-felt blessing and prayer for them in their circumstances.

Our Christian peace is not because we happen to be meeting here as a group of friends, or because we play Bridge together, or that we're in Rotary together. We are together as brothers and sisters in worship because of the resurrected Christ and through our commitment to the resurrected Christ, and through the resurrected Christ's commitment to each one of us.

Sometimes "Peace" is the most important and significant thing we can say to another person in Church, because of their life's circumstances. We never know what joys or what burdens people bring to Church with them. To be able to look them in the eye and to say "Peace be with you," and when we get back to a hand-clasp and a hand-shake it can be a most significant tangible ministry to them, even though we have no idea about their joys or burdens.

In Ukraine today, "Peace" is a most significant word. "Peace" seem to be a hopeless goal as missiles and tank-cannons crash and fill the air with their deadly noise, and turn beautiful cities and homes into rubble. In Ukraine today "Peace" may seem to be a lost cause because of the increasing weeks of death and destruction that are being inflicted. In Kiyiv, in Mariupol, in Kharkiv and in other towns and villages the word "Peace" must have a hollow ring to it. In Russia the word "Peace" is being drowned out by the word "victory" – and they are not synonymns. But in Ukraine the word "Peace" is also being drowned out by the word "Victory." Where victory at any cost is being sought, can peace ever be found?

In our nation today, as Anzac Day comes to us, "Peace" is a word that we must work at and prize. We live in a country of peace. Election campaigns highlight the differences between parties, and policies and people, but yet we do have "peace." Peace is disturbed by crime, and by relationship problems between races and neighbours, but peace is only disturbed ... it is not fractured. And whatever we think of Anzac Day, and however we observe it, we must appreciate the peace in which we live and for which men and women were prepared to lay down their lives ... a peace that attracts migrants and refugees to our shores for this blessing that they don't have in their own countries.

"Peace be with you" – the calming, centering words of the resurrected Jesus.

"Peace be with you" – the pastoral, blessing words of our Holy Communion service.

"Peace be with you" – the word and concept lost in Ukraine.

"Peace be with you" – the enormous benefit of living in Australia.

"Peace be with you" – the blessing we can bring to the homes and community where we live.

So ... let us right now share the words of our resurrection, pastoral blessing – "Peace be with you."