

Easter 2, Year A
John 20: 19-31
March 30, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

A Different Kind of Peace:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

When I was in high school, I learned about Pax Romana—that long period of peace and stability the Roman empire enjoyed between the reign of Cesar Augustus and the death of Marcus Aurelius. I imagined it to be a time when there was no violence, no wars, no famine. A time when that great gift of Western civilization—Roman citizenship—was available even to conquered peoples. Pax Romana—I imagined it to be a time of plenty. A time when all shared in the fruits of peace.

I didn't think about Jesus and Pax Romana existing at the same time. They were worlds apart as far as I was concerned. I never put them in the same sentence or paragraph. But that's just what John does in the passage we hear today. Listen closely. Listen for echoes of Pax Romana.

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side....Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you."

There, sandwiched between the Peace of God are signs of Pax Romana—the holes the nails left in Jesus' hands and the gash the sword made when it pierced his side.

Think about that Pax Romana—a peace upheld by Roman legions, a peace maintained through conquest and occupation, a peace ensured by crucifixion. Think of the stability that marked that peace—a stability bought by extracting the wealth of occupied lands, a stability built on a scaffold of fear, a stability paid for by people in conquered lands.

How different the peace Jesus offers. How different the peace Jesus calls us to.

The peace Jesus gives, the peace he offers his disciples is a peace grounded not in fear but in love. A promise of peace to the poor, the hungry, the reviled and the persecuted. A promise of peace to those Pax Romana left behind—fishermen in Galilee, vineyard workers, day laborers, children and slaves. A promise of peace to people huddled behind locked doors of fear. A promise of peace to those made captive by despair. To all of these, and to you and me as well, Jesus says, "Shalom alechem"—"Peace be with you."

What is this peace that Jesus gives? At base, it is an assurance that we are not alone, that we are not without an advocate. It's a reminder that we rest in the hands of a loving God—a God whose mercy and justice extends to all.

But how does this play out? How does this peace work in the world you and I confront—a world where children go to bed hungry, a world where mothers daily fear for their sons safety? How does this work for the more than four thousand American families who have lost loved ones in Iraq and Afghanistan and the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghanis who also have lost loved ones? How does this work for women in Darfur as they make their way to the common well? How does this work for Christians facing persecution in Zimbabwe and Buddhist monks facing persecution in Tibet?

And, closer to home, where is this peace for all the many victims of domestic violence and all those who daily witness the physical decline of the one they love most in the world? Where is God's peace for those who know no peace?

Listen to the words Jesus speaks to his disciples. "As my Father has sent me, so I send you." The peace that Jesus leaves us with is the peace that we build with our lives. As Mother Theresa so aptly said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other" We are, in other words, part and parcel of one another.

Our peace, the peace Jesus gives us, the peace Jesus leaves with us, grows with our sharing it, our spreading it, our giving it away, our living as peace makers. To do that, to live as peace makers, we must live from a core of peace deep at the center of our being—not a shallow feeling of well-being that sweeps over us but from a deep well-spring of peace that comes from acknowledging fear while at the same time resting in the certainty that our God loves us and that our times and our lives are in God's hands. As the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Christians in Rome, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"(Romans 8: 39)

When we live from this place of certainty, this core of deep peace, we can begin to do the work of peace makers. Sometimes this work is simply speaking our truth. Sometimes it's the work of understanding the realities of other people's lives—making bridges across differences. Sometimes it's acting in small ways to relieve the suffering of others. As I hear the stories of Trinity—both now and in the past—I'm struck by the many ways this congregation has worked to bring a measure of peace to the lives of people in our community—bringing FISH, Meals on Wheels and Hospice of Marin to Sonoma and continuing to work to relieve the suffering of those in great need; providing the labyrinth as a place of prayer and meditation where people of all faiths can connect to the peace that lies deep within them; supporting and sustaining one another in times of deep need or great suffering.

In the last weeks and months of his life, Dick Michelis lived from this center of peace. In his dance with death, he danced with confidence that nothing could separate him from the love of God. That made all the difference in the world for him and for those who shared the dance floor with him. How gracefully he stepped into the dance. What trust he had in God. What peace he knew. What peace he brought to those around him. Not a peace apart from strife or struggle or pain but a peace in the midst of all of that—a peace in the midst of the ravages cancer can bring to life.

As I think of Dick and all those who live in the midst of pain and suffering and who yet have peace, I'm reminded of the hymn "They Cast Their Nets in Galilee." Perhaps you remember the last stanza.

The peace of God it is no peace
But strife sewn in the sod
But let us pray for just one thing
The marvelous peace of God.