

## John 20:19-23

<sup>19</sup>On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews. Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, “Peace be with you!” <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

<sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you! Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you.” <sup>22</sup>After saying this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>Whenever you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

## Life-Giving Hands

### I.

“So...how’s life?” The question came at her from a classmate she hadn’t seen in years. How could she deflect the question? To be honest, her life was a mess. She was separated from her husband. She worked a job she hated. Although her kids never said it directly, they blamed *her* for the marriage problems. That made her time with them less than fulfilling. She was scared. She was angry. She felt trapped. This wasn’t the life she had imagined. She dreamed about running away from it all—starting over, and really living life.

Sometimes it’s the idealism of youth. Sometimes it’s a midlife crisis. Sometimes it’s burnout from the decades-long grind of work. We all go through cycles when we feel it might be time to start *really* living life.

Some take backpacking trips. Others buy overpriced imported German convertibles and cruise the scenic roads of America. Still others dream of spending their golden years cruising the Mediterranean. These adventures, they try to tell themselves, will help them *really* live.

But when those same people return home from their feel-good trips and realize their souls still feel empty, they still wonder what it means to *really* live.

The Bible has something to say about *really* living. It doesn’t involve a backpack, a BMW, or any far-flung region of the world. Christians don’t need a midlife crisis or end-of-life burnout to trigger life worth living.

What we need is the empty tomb. We need Easter. We need the happy shouts: “Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!” We need Jesus’ appearance to the disciples in the upper room, showing us his Life-Giving Hands, and then explaining that Easter gives us a life that is *really* worth living.

### II.

The disciples were like the woman whose life was a mess. “On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews” (John 20:19, EHV). They were scared. It would seem rightfully so. After all, if the Jews were so underhanded as to mastermind the crucifixion of an innocent man, what would stop them from coming after his disciples next?

72 hours earlier they had abandoned Jesus and fled from the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus was arrested. Peter had disowned him, just as Jesus predicted. Despite the fact that Jesus had been preparing them for months about his upcoming death, they still seemed genuinely shocked and surprised about the fact that he had died on the cross on Friday

afternoon.

They were acting like Jesus was dead and their lives weren't worth living. They were afraid. They felt guilty. They were trapped in that upper room.

So...how's life? Jesus already knew how agitated they were and how worried they were. He didn't lead with that question. "Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, 'Peace be with you!'" (John 20:19, EHV).

It was still Easter. They had seen the empty tomb. They heard the reports of the women and the Emmaus disciples, but they hadn't seen Jesus with their own eyes. They still weren't sure what to make of the day's events.

Jesus came and stood in their presence, showing himself alive and in person. He gave his stunned audience a moment to grasp the full import of his bodily presence. "After he said this, he showed them his hands and side" (John 20:20, EHV). Jesus in person, together with the sight of his life-giving hands, convinced the disciples they were indeed looking at their resurrected Lord.

You and I have the witness of the women who went to the tomb early in the day. We have the Emmaus disciples telling us about what they had seen. Peter tells us: "We also have the completely reliable prophetic word. You do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19, EHV).

This world is a dark place. It is filled with doubt and disappointment, with guilt and grief, with punishment and pain, with death and despair. The world is so dark it often makes us want to join the disciples in the upper room with the doors locked in fear. On Good Friday the whole world went dark when God laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all.

But today marks the third day from Friday. It's Easter. Christ is alive! It took a moment for that fact to sink in. But sink in it did. "The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord" (John 20:20, EHV). Easter joy is what makes life *really* worth living.

Have you grabbed hold of Easter joy? The gloomy hopelessness of the world died on Good Friday; so did the darkness of sin and all the nagging guilt. Easter not only means joy, but peace. Paul said: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19, EHV). Grab hold of Jesus' life! His life makes *your* life *really* worth living. Along with Jesus, peace follows joy into your soul.

### III.

Easter evening was about more than Jesus showing the disciples his life-giving hands. Jesus spoke about how his life-fulfilling hands connect directly to our life-giving mission. "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you! Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you'" (John 20:21, EHV). The Father had sent Jesus from heaven on a mission to forgive sins and redeem the world. Jesus didn't just *hear* the word of God, he *did* what his Father said. In the same way the Father sent Jesus, Jesus now sends *us*. He takes disciples—followers—and transforms them into apostles—those sent out to proclaim. "He has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup>Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, inasmuch as God is making an appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:19-20, EHV). Ambassadors for Jesus! That's life really worth living!

The scope of that task seems overwhelming. It was for Jesus' first disciples, too. Within moments of Jesus' appearance they had gone from Easter peace and joy to being commissioned and sent out as ambassadors for Christ. They wouldn't go alone, though. "After saying this, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:22,

EHV).

We know that Holy Spirit gives faith. What the disciples received was something in addition to that. The Holy Spirit empowers and enables each of us to carry out Christ's call: "Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you" (John 20:21, EHV). Fifty days later the Holy Spirit came so powerfully on these disciples that uneducated fishermen became powerful proclaimers of the gospel. 3,000 souls were added to the Christian Church on that day.

Jesus gave further instructions: "Whenever you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:23, EHV). With these words, Jesus confidently places into the hands of every believer the keys to heaven. Forgiving sins or withholding forgiveness from those who reject Christ or are plainly unrepentant is tantamount to opening and closing the door to heaven.

Luther's catechism identifies these keys as the special power and right Christ gives only to Christians. Forgiving sins and announcing peace is what Jesus did on Easter when he showed his disciples his life-giving hands. What better way to live Easter daily than to use our hands for God's life-giving purpose—to forgive our brothers and sisters.

The keys are valuable only when you use them. So use them. That's why God gave them to you. Living at peace with God and your neighbor is what makes life *really* worth living.

#### IV.

The disciples *thought* they had nothing to live for. They acted like Jesus was dead. Miraculously, Jesus appeared in their presence on Easter and showed them his life-giving hands. Then he sent them on his life-giving mission—empowered by the Holy Spirit with his forgiving keys. Today there are more than two billion Christians scattered around the world who owe a debt of gratitude to the church's humble beginnings that Easter evening.

So...how's life? How are you? Are you stuck? Do you think you've got nothing to live for?

Stop acting like Jesus is dead, because he's not. Look again at his life-giving hands. Jesus is alive! Act like it. Pray like it. *Believe* like it. Embrace his call: "I am sending *you!*" Work to bring the gospel to the other 5½ billion people in our world—one soul at a time. Receive his Holy Spirit and use the keys to proclaim peace. Live life like there's no death, because Easter means there *is* no death. Easter makes life *really* worthy living. Amen.