

## **The Sixth Sunday of Easter/Music Sunday**

May 10, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Romans 4:24B-5:11

*Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

A four-year-old and a six-year-old presented their mom with a houseplant. They had used their own money to buy it and she was thrilled. Their Dad stood back appreciating the lovely moment. The older of the two said with a sad face, "There was a bouquet at the flower shop that we wanted to give you, Mom. It was real pretty but it was too expensive. It had a ribbon on it..... The father quickly interrupted, "What you got is beautiful, son." Mom jumped in to reassure them, "Yes, I love it, boys and it will grow for years, just like you. I don't think anything could be better.". "But Mom," the elder persisted, "you didn't see that bouquet. It would have been perfect because you're always telling us to "give it a rest" so you can have some peace and that's exactly what the ribbon on flowers said. It said 'Rest In Peace'.<sup>1</sup>

I'm sure that family will eventually bring up the "Rest in Peace" flowers each year around Mother's Day for a good laugh. Maybe it's unfortunate that "rest in peace" has been co-opted for funerals and tombstones. Is there really anything more needed in our lives and world than some peace? We wish each other peace each Sunday. We value peace in our homes and relationships. We pray for peace in our workplaces, communities, country and world. And we intuitively know that this peace is more than the absence of conflict or difficulties. It's the peace of God that surpasses all understanding that will guard hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7) It's the peace that allows you to find rest even when you're facing surgery, or too much work or sitting by the hospital bed of someone you love. Have you known that kind of peace?

I have to admit that peace is not usually the feeling I experience when I try to wade into the writings of St. Paul. His adept skills in Greco-Roman argument and writing make it challenging. Yet the richness of God's peace and love are usually to be found

buried in its depths and logic – like it is in our reading this morning. Paul announces “we have been set right with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (v. 25) and hence are at peace with God through that same Jesus Christ (v. 1)”<sup>2</sup> There have been as many attempts to explain *how* God in Christ makes it possible for us to be acceptable as there have been explanations of how God raised Jesus from the dead. But for Paul and the early church, the “how” wasn’t what was important. What was of importance was this simply priceless truth —“while we were still weak.. God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” and *therefore* (one of those logic words) we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now we are ONE again with God, embraced by the Trinity, surrounded by God’s love, presence and generosity — THAT is why we can have access to the peace of God even in times of suffering. The reconciliation and access are all God’s doing. Our faith in that God is what then opens our lives to have God’s gifts of peace and hope poured into us now — not just at our death, in heaven — but right now!

When we live by faith in God who raised Jesus from the dead, we join our lives with our Lord. It makes me think of these two cats abandoned in Los Angeles. While rescuers watched for an opportunity to safely catch Tommy and Tyler, they noticed something strange. Before these two cats would walk or run away, they would twine their tails together. When they finally captured them, they discovered Tommy was blind. But joined to Tyler, he was able to stay safe and live well. When we live in our faith in God who raised Jesus from the dead, we intentionally intertwined our lives with God’s. We latch on to God’s ways, open ourselves to God’s love and grow to realize that it’s our Lord’s presence and grace that already and forever have hold of us. Faith is not the church you belong to or a thing that you have like measles. Faith is not passive but actively shapes the very way we think, talk and act as we digest the love God pours into our hearts.

Because the God who raised Jesus from the dead has hold of us in love, we need not be robbed of peace or hope when we meet the inevitable adversities of human life on this side of eternity. Paul says we can celebrate or boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope [that is found in God] does not disappoint us. Paul is not suggesting in any way that we should seek, enjoy or like suffering so we can build endurance and character. But what he IS saying is that when we hold on to faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, God will be there with us, giving us strength, working to bring the fruits of comfort and hope where we may only see pain and disappointment. How can we be sure of that? Paul's logic would go this way: God did not choose to leave us when we rebelled and rejected him in sin, but instead chose reconciliation with us, proving his love through the death and resurrection of Jesus, therefore God is not about to abandon us now. And if that doesn't help assure you that God is at work even in our worst times, than think of those times you made it through what you thought was impossible. Look back at those dark days and remember when good thing *did* happen and people showed up or called at the right time. When we can accept that the grace and power of God who raised Jesus from the dead is never going to ever walk away from us, than we can know peace and hope in any circumstance. Or, as Paul said to the people of Corinth ---- carried in the very life of Christ, we may be afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not abandoned, down but not destroyed (2 Cor. 4: 8-9)

This peace and hope we have through faith is not unrealistic poppycock or mere optimism. God's peace that passes all understanding is the living grace of God guarding our hearts and minds. The hope that does not disappoint, isn't everything turning out the way we want but the certainty that God will make it possible for us to find a new kind of

joy, love and life in what does come about. We hear about this sustaining hope and peace in the stories of Holocaust and prison camp survivors. I hear it every time I talk to my sister about her chemotherapy and in the Bible Study group I attend at the Maryland Correctional Training Center. We've seen the peace and hope of God upholding each other as we've walked together through illnesses, surgeries and losses of different varieties. The Word, the church and experiences have helped us to know that God's peace and hope exist and prevail.

But I can see the question in the room and in some of your eyes: "Does that mean if we don't feel peace or hope, we don't have enough faith?" No, don't believe that lie. In times of stress and hardship, when things or our bodies seem out of our control, our feelings will give our faith a run for its money. It is then we let God hold on to us. We let the faith of our family, friends and church uphold us in love and prayer until we can remember once again that , despite our feelings, Jesus did not remain in the grave. Jesus was raised from the dead. Who would have thought that even a possibility on Good Friday?

You still may want to avoid giving someone you love a bouquet of flowers that say "Rest in Peace." But don't ever forget that faith in God who raised Jesus from the dead has given you access to God's peace and the hope it produces. Our stories of when we experienced that peace and hope in adverse circumstances may be the most effective witness of faith we can offer when the time is right and ripe. Until that opportunity arises, we practice — The peace of the Lord be with you. (And also with you.) Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 5/9/15

## ENDNOTES

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1.adapted from an sermon illustration submitted by A. Todd Coget on <http://www.sermoncentral.com/>

2. Paul J. Achtemeier, Interpretation: Romans, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985 p 91