

Text: John 20:19-31

As anyone with a computer or a smart phone knows....these so called time-saving devices can be just the opposite. Even with all our technology, industry, scientific and medical knowledge, people in our nation are actually more stressed out than ever. In fact, it is said that "stress" is the "new normal" and April has even been declared the month of "stress awareness." I have to confess that I am so used to feeling busy and stressed out myself that my life actually feels "off" if and when things really slow down for me. Job related stress is a major problem in the US with 25-40% of job burnout being blamed on stress. Stress in the home, due to conflict and poor communication is a problem reported by a majority of households today too. It's difficult to read or watch the news or television and not be bombarded with negative, frightening, and stress inducing images. The leading six causes of death in the U.S. right now are: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide: all of which have been linked medically to stress. Even our children and young people are reporting high levels of stress. And so stress, which is the opposite of peace, is a formidable challenge in our culture.

When we look at the programming on TV, particularly reality television, much of it is geared to either help us escape from the stresses of life or provide ways to cope with that stress, particularly stress within families with shows like Nanny 911, Wife Swap and the World's Strictest Parents to name a few. Some of you may remember the TV show on TLC awhile back called, "Shalom in the Home" that featured a Jewish Rabbi named Rabbi Shmuley. Rabbi Shmuley would go into an average American home that was wrought with conflict or problems. He would then diagnose the trouble and begin counseling the family on how to resolve it. I'm sure many of you would love to have our own personal Rabbi Shmuley, but clearly this series reflects to us the nature of our culture of stress and our need to find peace, shalom.

But in this second week of Easter, we read a powerful story in our Gospel about Jesus' appearance to the fearful disciples who were hiding in a locked room following Jesus' death,

afraid that they too would be executed. But Jesus' encounter with them is one that provides comfort and, in the case of Thomas, often called "doubting Thomas," provides relief from nagging doubts about who Jesus is. One striking feature of Jesus' message is that he says to his disciples, "Peace be with you" three times in this short section of text. Jesus has said this in earlier Gospel accounts and it is clear he desires peace for his followers, but in this passage it seems absolutely to be central to his post-resurrection message.

"Peace be with you." This phrase was and is a common Hebrew blessing and is used in Jewish liturgies. We use the phrase in our liturgy when we pass the Peace saying, "The peace of the Lord be always with you" and "Also with you" and then wish those around us the peace of the Lord. When we do this, we are in a very real sense, blessing one another, wishing God's peace and harmony upon them. It's easy to say it and forget what we mean by it, but we should pass the peace with intentionality and love. We say this during the Gloria in our liturgy when we say, "Glory to God in the highest **and peace** to his people on earth." This declaration of peace was sung by the angels when they announced the birth of Jesus, and, like a bookend, it is central to Jesus' last words before he left the earth: peace is absolutely central to our faith.

But back to Jesus in the locked house with those frightened, stressed out disciples. "Peace be with you" he says to them three times. Remember that the situation looked very, very bad at that point: the disciples had every reason to be frightened and stressed out, their lives were on the line and were changing so rapidly that it was overwhelming. We too are overwhelmed much of the time with work, relationships, parenting, finances, taxes, illness, our weight, our age, our health, depression, violence, political unrest, war, loneliness, anger....these all weigh so heavily on us. So how you and I find and embrace the peace that Jesus describes?

The disciples, like us, needed reassurance. We surely need comforting as well, we need to hear God's message of peace to us personally. We need to know that Jesus' words, "Peace be with you" are

for us too. And peace in light of the good news of the resurrection is absolutely central to the Easter message.

One of my favorite quotes by Rabbi Schmuley is when he said,

*“Ten percent of life is what happens; the other 90 percent is what you do about it.”*

Certainly, God is our greatest source of peace. And with God’s help we can take the 10 percent of our life and all that “happens to us”-all the things we can’t control, and then go make the other 90% of our life fulfilling, life giving, and, even peace-filled. We find peace by opening ourselves to the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus imparts to us. Make God your hiding place when the stresses of life are too much to bear and when you are overwhelmed. Martin Luther, the great reformer once said, *“I have so much to do today that I’m going to need to spend three hours in prayer in order to be able to get it all done.”* The Psalmist wrote, “You are my hiding place. You protect me from trouble. You surround me with joyous songs of salvation.” The first step towards a life filled with peace is found by simply resting in God and God’s presence through prayer, meditation, the Scripture.

A second and central pathway into peace is described in our Gospel today when Jesus says, “ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.” Do you truly want to have **peace** in your soul? Then learn to forgive. Forgive those who have wronged you, not by forgetting what they have done, that is not forgiveness, but by giving your anger and hostility over to God. By saying, “God, you deal with this person and their actions in whatever way you think best. As for me, fill my heart with forgiveness. I forgive them just as you have forgiven me.” And then let it go. God will help you do this. When hatred and anger can no longer find a nesting place in your heart, then your heart will be at peace. Forgive, not because you’re being “nice” to the other person, forgive, because you have to: forgive because this is essential for your soul, your well being, and for cultivating peace.

There are many other practical things we can do to bring peace into our lives. Worship, singing,

praising God, and taking care of ourselves through exercise, eating healthfully, even getting enough sunshine & light work. We can count our blessings instead of focusing on the negative things. We can monitor who we spend our time with and what images we allow into our homes through the television and media. We can practice self care by taking time out for solitude and making time to be with our significant others, our children, and our friends. Ask yourself: what is life giving to me? And then make time to do it, whatever it is: garden, read, take a long bath, nap, enjoy the outdoors, have coffee with a friend. Whatever it is. Allow that for yourself and pray for help if you struggle to do it.

But peace can be yours. There is peace for all of us in light of the resurrection because **we know** the end of the story-that death is not the final word, that hope beyond death exists and that new life can be ours through Jesus Christ. We can be those of whom Jesus speaks when he says to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

There is a well known saying, “Peace begins with me.” When we cultivate peace within our own hearts and lives, truly, we will not be the only beneficiaries. We are called to be at peace because it also benefits those around us, those in our home, our church, our work place and our community. In fact, cultivating peace within ourselves is good for the world. As we seek and find divine peace more and more, our world will become more peaceful as well. We are called to be peacemakers and to pray for peace wherever conflict exists. And so my friends...the peace of the Lord be always with you.