

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Well, as anyone with a computer or smart phone knows, these so-called time-saving devices can be just the opposite. Even with all of our technology, our industry, scientific and medical knowledge, people in our nation are busier and more stressed out than ever. In fact, it's being said that stress is just the new normal. And April has been declared the month of stress awareness.

I have to confess that I'm so used to feeling busy and stressed out myself that my life actually feels off when things just slow down for me. And job-related stress is a major problem in the US, with 25% to 40% of job burnout being blamed on stress. Stress in the home due to conflict or poor communication is a problem reported by a majority of households today. And it's difficult to sit down and read the news or watch anything on television news-wise without being bombarded with all of the negative, frightening, stress-inducing images and stories.

The leading six causes of death in the US are heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide. And all of them have been medically linked to stress. Even our young people, our very young people, are reporting high levels of stress. And so stress, which is truly a lack of peace, is a huge problem in our culture. And if you look at programming on TV, particularly I've noticed the reality TV shows, but a lot of the programming, it is really geared to help us escape, escape from the stresses of life or provide ways to cope with that stress, including stress in our families.

Some of you might remember the TV show on TLC a couple years ago called Shalom in the Home. Shalom in the Home, it featured a well-known rabbi, Rabbi Shmuley as he's called, known as America's rabbi. And Rabbi Shmuley would go into an average American home with all of their problems and stress. He would diagnose the troubles and begin to counsel each of the family members on ways to resolve it, ways to bring peace into the home, to bring shalom.

And shalom, a Hebrew word, refers to that very deep sense of abiding peace. It's a sense of completeness within you. I'm sure many of us would love to have our very own Rabbi Shmuleys at home to work with us. But clearly, the series reflects that nature of our culture, a culture of so stress and that deep desire, the need to find peace, to find the blessing of shalom in our lives.

And in this second week of Easter, we read that powerful story in our gospel about Jesus' appearance to the fearful disciples who were hiding away, stressed out, locked in a room, following Jesus' death. Absolutely scared to death that they'd be executed. And Jesus' encounter with them is one that provides deep comfort. And in the case of Thomas, who of course is infamously known as Doubting Thomas, Doubting Thomas, he ultimately provides a sense of relief from the nagging doubts about who Jesus is.

Now, I don't think this title for Thomas is fair, Doubting Thomas, because he ultimately, if you notice, makes a profound statement of faith in this passage. And I was researching this week, and I came across this Greek comic strip with Thomas. And he's standing there and he's talking to the other Apostles. And he says, "Look, all I'm saying is we don't call Peter, Denying Peter. And we don't call Mark, Runaway Naked Mark." And the disciples are saying, "Oh, just let it go, Thomas. Let it go already."

And even though the label isn't fair, I agree it's not fair, Doubting Thomas, but it helps us to remember, it reminds us that we will all have times of doubt and that's okay. We all have times when we need that assurance, when we need to be reminded about God's love, who God is, of God's presence in our lives.

Another striking feature of Jesus' message in this passage though is that you might have noticed he says to his disciples three different times the words, "Peace be with you." Three times in this very short section of scripture. And Jesus pronounces this peace earlier in the gospel accounts. Jesus talks a lot about peace. He desires peace for his followers. But in this message here, this post-resurrection message, peace is absolutely central. Peace be with you.

This phrase was and is a common Hebrew blessing and it's used still today in Jewish liturgies. But we use that phrase, of course, in our own liturgy. Whenever we pass the peace, we you know, "Peace of the Lord be always with you." "And also with you." Or at 7:30, "Or with thy Spirit," they say. And then we wish those around us the peace of the Lord. This isn't like a little meet-and-greet moment in our liturgy. This sense of peace is defined as a tranquil state of soul, assured of its salvation, fearing nothing from God, content with its earthly lot.

And when we're offering this word of peace to others, we're really blessing them. You're blessing one another when you do that with this incredibly deep sense of divine grace and harmony being wished upon them.

And I know it's easy to say it. And we say it and we hear it so much, we forget what we mean by it. But when we pass the peace, when we get to that moment, we should say it with intentionality and love and look right at the person we're passing the peace to and sense that blessing that you're giving them. Peace be with you.

We also talk about peace in our Gloria, which we just sang when we say, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on Earth." And this declaration of peace was sung by the angels when they announced the birth of Jesus and it's part of Jesus' last words before he leaves earth. Peace, absolutely central to our faith.

But going back to Jesus and that locked room with those frightened, stressed out disciples saying, "Peace be with you." Three times he's saying it. Remember how bad the situation looked for them in that moment. They had every reason to be frightened. They had every reason to be stressed out. Their lives were on the line and were changing so rapidly, it was overwhelming. And many of us can relate to that sense of being overwhelmed, overwhelmed much of the time; work, relationships, unemployment, parenting, finances, taxes, illness, our weight, our age, our health, depression, loneliness, anger, all of these things that can burden us so deeply weigh heavily on us. And yet, we're called to find peace. We're called to be given this peace.

So where and how do we find peace? The disciples, like us, needed reassurance. And we need to hear again God's message of peace to us personally because peace is part, essential part, of the Easter message.

One of my favorite quotes by Rabbi Shmuley is this, "10% of life is what happens, the other 90% is what you do about it." Spiritually speaking of course, God is our greatest source of peace. And with God's help, we can take the 10% of our life that we can't control, the 10% that just happens to us, and then we can go and make that other 90% of our life fulfilling, and life-giving, and even peace-filled.

One of the primary ways, the first and most important way we find peace is by going to God, resting in God's spirit, making God our hiding place when the stresses of life are bearing down on us. The Psalmist wrote, "You are my hiding place. God, you protect me from trouble. You surround me with joyous songs of salvation." That first and most profound step to faith, of being filled with peace, is just being and resting in God's presence, receiving the gift that God gives from those who seek it.

And in just a few minutes, we're gonna be doing a baptism. And we as a community will be inviting God's holy spirit to rest upon the newly baptized, Baby Kira. And one of the gifts we proclaim when we make that prayer in baptism is for the fruits of God's spirit to rest upon the newly baptized, the fruit of peace.

Another central pathway into peace that's described in our gospel today, and I believe it is not an accident that it's this way, Jesus is talking about peace, and then he starts talking about forgiveness. He says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they're forgiven them." Do you want to have real deep and abiding peace in your soul? Then you have to learn to forgive. Forgive those who have wronged you. And we've all been wronged, sometimes in horrible ways. And we forgive, not by forgetting what they've done us. That isn't forgiveness. It's not forget it, put it out of my mind. It's not that. It's by giving all that anger and all that hostility over to God, handing it over to God, and saying, "It's yours. You deal with this person. You deal with them and what they've done in whatever way you see fit. As for me, fill me with your forgiveness."

It is a prayer that God will answer, that God can grant. In fact, I would encourage you to even speak the words. Just say, "I forgive them." Say their name. Say it out loud. "Just as you God have forgiven me." And then let it go. And a little miracle will happen. God can help us with this. Because when hatred and anger no longer find a nesting place in our heart, then our hearts are at peace. Forgive though. Forgive not because you're being nice. Don't do it just to be nice to the other person. That isn't forgiveness either. Do it because you're doing something essential for your soul, for cultivating peace in yourself. Because peace can be yours.

As the mantra goes, "Peace begins with me." Absolutely true. There is peace for us in the light of Easter, partly because we know the end of the story. And we know death isn't the final word. We know there's hope beyond the grave and that new life is ours with God's help. Our faith rests on a God who desires our wholeness and our healing, our peace, our shalom. And as you embrace this in faith, you become one of those of whom Jesus speaks when he says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not yet seen, yet have come to believe."

As peace becomes the centerpiece of our lives, we find incredible health benefits. We find stress no longer rules us. We are centered. Our relationships improve. But the blessings don't just end there. As we receive God's peace, that peace spills out from us and touches

other people. We're not the only beneficiaries. God's peace will spill out from you onto others. And we're called to be at peace because it benefits the people around us; those in our home, in our church, in our community, and our workplaces.

In fact, cultivating peace within ourselves is essential work for the world. This world needs us to cultivate peace within ourselves.

And so my friends, the peace of the Lord be always with you.

Amen.