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THE HANDS OF THE PASSION: LIFE-GIVING HANDS

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He is risen! Alleluia! You have no idea how much I have been looking forward to saying those words to you on Easter Sunday as we assemble together. We didn't have the opportunity to do that last year with the pandemic. We missed all of Holy Week. We missed Easter Sunday and we missed the entire Easter season. Even though we had mini-devotions in church, it wasn't the same. We didn't sing our favorite Easter hymns together. We didn't get to greet one another. Easter changes everything. We have peace, joy, and hope. No matter what else is going on in the world, nothing can change the fact that Jesus rose from the dead and destroyed the power of death forever.

Many things have changed since we last assembled for Easter services two years ago. We are wearing masks. Many businesses have closed. Many schools have not yet opened. We have a new President of the United States. Tensions are running high at the border. Prices are going up, along with our national debt. Fewer people are going to church. Depression, anxiety, and suicide are going up.

Much of the world is celebrating Easter this morning or at least what they think Easter is all about. I'm not exactly sure what some people are celebrating. For some it is a spring festival where you can try out the newest fashions. For others it is a family get-together with a nice brunch. Kids are attracted to baby bunnies, chicks, and brightly colored eggs. But there has to be something more than that, isn't there? Let's go back to that first Easter Sunday. The risen Christ declares, "PEACE AND LIFE ARE YOURS!" See his LIFE-GIVING HANDS!

Let's remember that the mood on that first Easter Sunday wasn't exactly a joyful one. You may have come to church this morning with a little spring in your step, but it wasn't that way then. Not for anyone, not for Mary Magdalene, not for the other women, not for Peter, James, John, or any of the apostles, not for the two disciples who were going to Emmaus that afternoon. Jesus was dead and they knew that they weren't going to bring him back to life.

The apostles had spent three years with Jesus. They had seen and heard things that others could only dream of seeing and hearing. They considered themselves the most blessed that anyone could be. And then it all fell apart so quickly. They went to the Garden of Gethsemane and all of a sudden there were soldiers and temple police and Judas and torches and lanterns. Jesus was being led away bound. They ran away. Peter denied even knowing Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. Before the sun arose, Jesus was already on trial before Pontius Pilate the Roman governor. Boom! He was led out for execution carrying a cross and the apostles stood there in shame. Only John watched him die at the foot of the cross.

They felt guilt. When Jesus needed them most, they did nothing. They ran away and they stayed away. Maybe some of them came out of hiding long enough to watch Jesus try to carry his own cross and fall in the street, but they stayed away. They were afraid. They loved it when things were going well. They liked the crowds. Oh, they may have complained, but they liked it when people wanted to be around Jesus because that meant that people wanted to be around them. Most of them were common workers, fishermen, even a tax collector. Now they were celebrities, part of Jesus' posse. Palm Sunday was great! You had two huge crowds coming together. But many of those people were later shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

What was going to happen to them? They were afraid for their lives. They knew the hatred of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus was able to perform miracles and they had killed him. What chance would these helpless followers of Jesus have against the same opposition? They had every reason to believe that the enemies of Jesus were not going to stop with his death. They would send a message. They would do everything they could to punish anyone associated with Jesus of Nazareth. The apostles had left their businesses behind to follow Jesus. Even if they could get out of Jerusalem alive, how could they pick up the pieces? Would they try to carry on Jesus' work? They couldn't even agree amongst themselves what Jesus' work really was.

A resurrection? Oh, sure they had heard talk of that. Jesus was always talking about rising from the dead when he talked about suffering and dying. It sure seemed strange. Why was he always talking about suffering and dying? And how would a resurrection tie in with all of that? Reports were coming in all day. The women said that they had first seen angels who had told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. The angels even showed them the empty tomb and the grave cloths that Jesus had been wrapped in. Then the women claim that they had even seen Jesus himself who told the disciples to go to Galilee. The Emmaus disciples claimed to recognize him as he broke the bread. Even though they had seen Lazarus come forth from the tomb and had seen the young man of Nain sit up as his body was being taken out for burial and seen the daughter of Jairus, they just couldn't accept that Jesus could rise from the dead as he claimed that he would.

And then, there he was! The room had been locked because the apostles were afraid. That didn't make any difference to the risen Lord! He was there and he had a message for them: "Peace be with you!" I want you to think about those words and what they would mean to and for the apostles. I believe that the most unbelievable words ever spoken by our Lord Jesus came while on the cross as he prayed for the very people who were crucifying him: "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they were doing!" And the second most unbelievable words come here: "Peace be with you!"

Whenever you have a movie about someone coming back from the dead, do they ever say, "Peace be with you?" No, those who come back from the dead come back for vengeance upon those who killed them or made their lives miserable. When we hear a title like "Night of the Living Dead," we don't expect peace, joy, and love. We expect horrible vengeance and destruction. Isn't that what you would think Jesus would do if he did rise from the dead? Think of all the people he could get vengeance upon, starting with his own disciples who forsook him and denied him and did everything they could to save their own skin. And then you had Annas, Caiphas, the rest of the Sanhedrin, Herod, Pontius Pilate, Roman soldiers, the mob. It was a cast of thousands!

But that was not the message that Jesus came to bring. His was a message of peace, peace with God. That peace would come through sins forgiven. The sins were forgiven as Jesus offered up his life on the altar of the cross. The sins were forgiven as the sinless Son of God shed his holy, precious blood for the sin of the world. Jesus' resurrection meant that everything that he told his disciples was true. He was the Son of God. He was the Christ, the one promised in the sacred Scriptures to be our Savior. He was the Resurrection and the Life. These weren't mere empty words used to make someone feel better. They were real.

The resurrection was real. Jesus would show his disciples the wounds of love in his hands and side. When we talk about Easter, we are not talking hypothetically. We are not using wishful thinking. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if Jesus were still alive? If we close our eyes and just imagine, we can almost see him. As long as we remember him, he'll never really be dead. He'll always be alive in our hearts." That is not Easter. Those are Satan's lies. Easter is real and Easter is physical.

Why did Jesus insist on showing his disciples his hands and side? The message of the angel would have been enough. Jesus showed his hands and side repeatedly. Why did Jesus make over ten resurrection appearances? He

certainly could have made more than that. The Scriptures tell us of eleven. Why did Jesus insist on eating with them a number of times and reassuring them that he was not a ghost, spirit, or figment of their imagination? Because the apostles were weak sinful human beings just like us. Jesus would feed weak faith with powerful proof that he keeps his promises just as he feeds our weak faith with his very body and blood in the Lord's Supper.

The wounds in his hands and feet assure us that his death on Good Friday truly did bring us peace with God. Jesus spoke those words: "It is finished!" There is nothing more that you or I or anyone can do. Jesus did everything from beginning to end. The resurrection is the key to the Christian faith. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, we would have nothing. We would have no forgiveness of sins, no peace, no hope, no joy, nothing. Why would we get together to celebrate the teachings of a liar who claimed that he was going to rise from the dead and failed? As Paul put it so succinctly: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."

"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Our Savior has conquered death. He lives! So, what are you afraid of? We go through so many things in life, things that seem so threatening. We don't know what the future will bring. Will we have a job tomorrow? Will I ever find true love? Can I keep this marriage together? Should I? What is the doctor going to find at my next physical? You can fill in the blank. We all have our fears.

But we all have the risen Christ! His message wasn't merely for the apostles who were assembled that Sunday evening. It was meant for the world. Jesus would strengthen and equip them so that they could strengthen and equip us. The very same Jesus who appeared to them that evening is here with us this morning. We can't see him with our physical eyes and touch his wounds like the apostles, but you can rest assured that he is here! He comes to us in his Word. He comes to us in water and in bread and wine. He speaks the same words, "Peace be with you!"

Your sins are forgiven, every one of them! The hurtful things you've said and done, the things you can't take back, the grudges you kept until it was too late, the lies you told, the gossip you spread, the lusts you acted upon, the things you think that you got away with and the things you got caught red handed with and still tried to deny. Many of these you have forgotten and many of these you have tried to forget and can't. But Jesus proclaims peace to you! He took those sins to the cross and nailed them there forever. And he rose again, and he conquered not only our fear of death, but death itself. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death!"

That's the ultimate, isn't it? We don't have to fear death. Every Christian funeral is a statement of our hope, trust, and confidence. We can place our hand on the casket and confidently say that Jesus will raise up this very body on the Last Day. To the world it seems like utter nonsense, but to us it makes perfect sense because God himself stands behind this promise. Jesus lives and so will we!

Yes, there are many challenges to life, but we never face them alone. The risen Christ assures us that he is with us always to the very end of the age. He will walk with us. He will hold our hand. He will pick us up and carry us when we fall. When we stumble, we lean on his precious promises. He is risen! He lives! Peace be with you! AMEN.