

Life-Giving Hands!

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

We feel sorry for those who have handicaps. There are some things they can't do that we can. But in some ways the handicap have some advantages over us. The blind person has a keener sense of hearing. The deaf rely on sign language to communicate and sometimes that sign language says more than our words. We say, "Jesus." How does the deaf say Jesus? In sign language they stick a finger into the palm of each hand. I think that gesture says more than the syllables, "Jesus." It plainly tells us what Jesus did for us.

Today we are going to look at the nail pierced hands of Jesus. We are going to see that they are alive, and how they give life.

I. Jesus' nail pierced hands are alive!

"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, ..." The disciples were in hiding. They hid in a house and locked all the doors because they were afraid of the Jews. Jesus was their master and teacher. He was their Lord and Savior. They had put all their hopes and dreams on Jesus, and now that he is dead, what will happen to them? If the Jews could kill Jesus, what is stopping them from coming after them?

But they had more to be afraid of besides the Jews. They looked in a mirror and were filled with shame. John, the closest disciple to Jesus, the one he loved, fled when the soldiers came for Jesus. Along with his brother, James, they were known as the Sons of Thunder. One time these Sons of Thunder asked Jesus to bring down destruction on a city that rejected him. Where was their brave talk now hiding in that house? There was Matthew, the ex-tax collector. Jesus was not ashamed of him. He called him as a disciple, ate in his home, and put the Pharisees in their place when they asked Jesus why he was hanging out with sinners like Matthew. But Matthew was now ashamed of Jesus. Then there was Peter. Peter swore he would die for Jesus. He even brandished a sword when the soldiers came, but he, too, fled. All of them abandoned Jesus.

And they didn't show up later. Peter did, only to shamefully deny knowing Christ to a teenage girl. John showed up, but too little, too late.

So these disciples were afraid. They were afraid of the Jews. They were ashamed over their behavior. And they were afraid of God. They heard from the women he was alive. The Emmaus disciples had returned with the same message. What if Jesus is alive again? What will he say when he confronts them? Even if they didn't meet a living Jesus, one day they would stand before God who would ask, "What have you done?"

What fears do you have? We acknowledge that Jesus is alive, but do we act that way? We act and behave as though he were still dead. That is why we are more interested in what we eat or the job or what car to drive than on God's kingdom. And if Jesus were still dead, we would fear death and what follows. On the day you stand before God, what would you say to him? How many times have we made promises to God. We promise to pray more, to read the Bible more, to fight temptation more, to hate sin more, to go to church more, to stop being selfish, yet we commit the same sins over and over again. What should God say to us?

Well, the disciples did get to stand before God. Despite locked doors and a secret hiding place, Jesus appeared before them. What did he say? Did he say, "You can't run anymore?" Did he ask James and John where their thunder was now? Did he ask Matthew if wanted to go back to being a tax collector? Did he ask Peter if there was anything he can boast about now? No.

"Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." Jesus told them to be at peace. Stop being afraid even of the Jews. Stop feeling ashamed of yourselves. Look at my hands. Look at my side. I am alive. It is really me. I come to you as your friend. Peace be with you.

What do you think Jesus will say to you? The very same thing. "Peace be with you. Stop being afraid. Stop being ashamed. Look at my hands. They were once dead, but they are now alive." And his hands tell us why he approaches us as a friend. Those hands bear the marks where nails were. His side has the scar left by a Roman spear. He died, but he is alive again, and those scars are the reason we have peace. Those scars were all part of the suffering he endured as payment for our sins. Jesus rose from the grave to assure us that we are truly forgiven.

Locked doors couldn't keep Jesus away, nor will your sins. They do not come between you, a sinner, and a holy God. This is why Simeon, upon seeing the baby Jesus, could pray, "Now may your servant depart in peace." When they stoned Stephen to death, he looked up and saw the living Jesus at the right hand of God and heaven wide open. Look at Jesus' hands, his living hands, bearing the scars of his love. Don't be ashamed anymore. Jesus isn't ashamed of you. Stop being afraid. Those hands

drive away all fear, even the fear of death. ***“The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”*** Let the living hands of Jesus fill you with joy.

II. Jesus' life-giving hands.

And those living hands give life. ***“Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.””*** It is a special moment when mom or dad tosses the car keys to a teenager for the first time. At that moment the teen is an adult. The teen has an awesome responsibility, but also a wonderful privilege. That teen can show mom and dad that they can trust him or her.

Jesus did that to his disciples that Easter evening, only it wasn't the keys to the car. He tossed them the keys to heaven. ***“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*** Jesus trusted them with the keys to heaven. And he trusts you with the same keys, every one of you. Do you know what this means? As Luther explains in his Catechism, the keys are that special power and right he gives to Christians. They actually open heaven when you tell a sinner that his or her sins are forgiven. Think of it, we can relive Easter each time a wife forgives her husband or a parent forgives a child. But don't forget about the other key. It actually closes heaven if someone is not worried about sin or not repentant. Yes, there are times we do not forgive sins. It is a warning of what stubbornness means if someone does not repent and believe in Jesus. But even this is an act of love so one sees a need for a Savior and we can then use the key to forgive sins and open heaven. And we are promised that it has the same effect as if Jesus spoke those words as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians, ***“He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us”*** (2 Co 5:19-20).

And now God sends people out there to use those keys just as he sent Jesus. ***“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”*** Jesus used those keys. He did with the Samaritan woman at the well. He used them after he healed a man of blindness and later found him and told him how he can now see spiritually. He used them on Zacchaeus by inviting himself into his home. And he used them to open heaven to a criminal dying on the cross next to him.

You don't leave those keys on the dresser. You have them all the time. Think of the opportunities you have each day, the Samaritan women in your life, those living in spiritual blindness, those scorned by society, those who took advantage of others, friends, relatives, neighbors, strangers, all living in fear.

Sounds a bit overwhelming, doesn't it. It sounds hard. But Jesus makes it easier. ***“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*** A small boy practiced and learned all his lines for a school play. Then, right before the play began, he admitted he was scared. He was afraid he would forget his lines. His teacher calmly tells him that she is standing on the side of the stage and will whisper his lines to him. God doesn't throw us out there and wish us good luck. He sends us the Holy Spirit. He is with us. He prompts us to remember something we read or learned in the Bible. You don't have to quote twenty proof passages when you share your faith. It could be as simple as telling the person what it means for you, a sinner, to have a Savior. And he does the work. Remember, no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. He makes dead hearts alive and dead sinners into living saints. Doesn't the Holy Spirit give you confidence to use the keys?

I know. I have seen the Spirit work. He still works in a poorly delivered sermon. Someone still has their faith strengthened. I have seen it in timid pastors or teachers who stumble over what to say, but the Spirit is still there working faith. I have seen him work on my faith, so he must work on the hearts of others. And if someone doesn't want to listen, don't take it personally. They are resisting the Holy Spirit.

The deaf get it. Every time they sign the name of Jesus, they are telling themselves and us that his hands were pierced for our sins. And today we see those hands are alive in the resurrection, and how those hands bless us and send us out there with the keys to open heaven. And we have every reason to use those keys. Our hands and feet, eyes and nose, every part of us will be alive and well in the resurrection, too. Amen.