

*O Christ the same, through all our story's pages –
Our loves and hopes, our failures and our fears;*

It was the dog days of summer in 2020, which were even more doggy than usual because we couldn't be closer than 6 feet to one another. And yet, for as much as you would think a global pandemic would be a hindrance to getting to know this new community, it really wasn't. Because it's not in the nature of this church to let newcomers go by unnoticed or unwelcomed. Some of you helped us move into our new home; some of you brought meals; some of you made phone calls or sent emails or cards; and some of you I met in worship, only recognizing you from your eyes and above. For all of the challenges that began our time in ministry together, it was abundantly clear to my family and me that the Holy Spirit had called us here. That there was something good and wonderful and, dare I say, important even, happening here at Joy Lutheran Church. And there was. And there is. And there will continue to be.

The first time that Jesus says, "Peace" to the disciples is in the midst of their fear. Perhaps it's unfair, but they really should have known better. Mary Magdalene had told them of her encounter with the risen Lord and yet, here they are, huddled in a room together, gathered and gripped by fear. Given their past experiences with fear, it makes all the sense in the world that Jesus first greets them as he has so often, "Peace be with you." Do not be afraid. Do not fear. But in the presence of our Lord and Savior, be whole, be complete, be one, be at peace.

*Eternal Lord, the King of all the ages,
Unchanging still amid the passing years;*

When you commit to being a part of a community, you are committing to being a part of the hard and challenging times as well as the times that are good and wonderful. Together we have said tearful goodbyes to our loved ones. We've entrusted them into the care of God. We've prayed farewell and Godspeed. And such moments, as difficult as they are, are also crucial to the life we share together. It's what makes this church truly a community for all times and people. But we did not despair in these times. The Spirit has always led us back to the path of life and joy and peace. And, indeed, there have been many joyful moments in our life together. Baptisms in bunches of all ages. Confirmands sharing their faith in inspiring ways. Stories from camp and camps we've hosted. Community events, outreach miracles, service days. Newborns and birthdays, weddings and anniversaries. All signs of the life and activity of the Spirit, moving in and through this community.

Showing them his hands and side, Jesus does not discount what life has been like for his friends these past few days. And yet, this is not a moment of despair, but a moment of joy. The disciples rejoice in the presence of their risen Savior. And again, in this moment of joy, Jesus says to the disciples, "Peace be with you." The second time Jesus offers a word of peace is in the midst of joyful celebration. In the midst of their joy, Jesus says, "Peace." Be alive. Rest and rejoice fully in this moment. For it is now as it will be forever.

*O Lord of love, for all our joys and sorrows,
For all our hopes when earth shall fade and flee;*

Our text doesn't say it, but I suspect that there is a third word of peace that Jesus gives. After declaring that they are now sent into the world, just as Christ was sent into the world, he breathes into the disciples the Holy Spirit. A peace which does not come by a word, but by an abiding act. You and I are sent into the world to bear witness to the life and hope and peace we ourselves have known through Christ. Which is not an easy thing to do, were we to do it all on our own. But, we are not alone. We do not live and seek life on our own. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we have and we are and we will continue to carry on the ministry of love and grace that leads us to deeper faith and greater love. It is the Spirit who leads us further into abundant life, wherever our journey may take us.

And now our journey together is coming to a close. Our paths moving in new ways. But in faith we know that any goodbye is only temporary; any goodbye is not the end. We are each called and sent, filled with the Holy Spirit to lead us on our next adventure. There will be times we will be afraid, times when we won't know the next step to take. But there will also be times of reunion and great joy. United forever by our past, in this present moment, we look toward what is to come, knowing that wherever we go, we are accompanied in all things by the Spirit. It will surely be different, but we know it will be good. Just as it has been. Just as it is. Just as it will be.

*O Christ the same, beyond our brief tomorrows,
We bring our thanks to you for all that is to be.*

Thank you, my friends in Christ. For your faith. For your courage. For your trust. For your kindness. For your grace. For your love. May the peace of Christ surround, uphold, and keep us, near or far, now and forever. Amen.