

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

A Place of Shalom

John 20:19-31

April 7, 2024

Happy Easter season! Easter is the season for spring flowers, rain showers, and total solar eclipses. It's the season for chocolate bunnies, coconut cake, church capital campaigns, and for disciples locking themselves in a room and hiding there until things settle down and they can get themselves together. There are times when a place to get away for a little while is just what you need. For all kinds of reasons and in all kinds of seasons.

Coaches call a timeout to give the players a moment to huddle and get their heads together. Bickering spouses sometimes say, "I need a minute," and retreat to opposite corners of the house to cool off—sometimes they need more than a minute. A shy child nestles into their mother's arms. The Earth each fall says, "Give me a minute," and retreats into winter. At least in Texas, winter is only about a minute. Knitted into creation's rhythms are times when you just need to retreat. Sabbath remembers this and holds it for us. Some places do, too.

The disciples are there, in such a place, locked in a room together. John says they are there for fear, and I'm sure that's true. They had just seen Jesus be crucified and had gotten the message plain and clear, not just from the Jewish leaders but also the Romans: steer clear of anything having to do with Jesus. They are in the locked room out of fear, but there has to be more to it, too. They're there out of shame, too. You know, they didn't actually see Jesus be crucified because they'd run away, these guys. Peter, of course. Jesus had said that Peter would deny him three times before the rooster crowed, and he did. There's shame. The rest of them did, as well.

Fear at what may happen and shame at what has happened. Uncertainty about what will happen. Uncertainty seems too mild a word to describe what you feel when the future has just crumbled in front of you like a California coastal highway. Fear, Shame, Uncertainty, doubt, too. They had doubts about it all. In other words, sometimes you feel like you're circling the drain. Sometimes, for all kinds of reasons, you need a place to get away and get yourself together. That was the locked room for the disciples.

This church campus has been such a place for over 20 years. When we started here, we knew from the very beginning we wanted it to feel like a retreat. And it has been that for many of us on important days when we sought the presence of God, and in some hard moments in life. In fear, in shame—those oak trees have heard some hard prayers and some confessions, In uncertainty—tears have watered this soil—from divorce, loss of jobs, deaths of loved ones, in the pandemic—uncertainty about the future. We understood from the first time a shovel of dirt was turned that DaySpring would be a place that knows its

place; a place of sabbath rest, renewal, a place of encounter with God. And that by God's grace, Jesus would meet people here, wherever they are.

We were not the first. For 40 years, from 1920 to 1960, on this same ground, children from broken families who were living apart from their parents at the Methodist Children's Home came here in the mornings to work and play on their working farm. You're sitting where the barn stood. Cows and chickens were here. Rows of corn and peach trees. Children came to do good work, to learn how to grow a garden, and to climb trees and play in the fields. I talked with a man who remembered growing up coming here as a child. He loved it. He loved this place. As far back as we can see, this place has been a place of retreat for people who need a place to be safe and loved. Burt saw not just a "For Sale" Sign, he saw a vestige and a memory and a place bearing witness to a life of compassion.

By God's grace, it always will be. But we don't make it so, no matter our best efforts. God does. A place is just a place until God comes. Then everything changes. A locked room is just a pressure chamber for fear, shame, and uncertainty until Jesus comes and changes everything and everyone in it. A tomb is the place of the dead until Easter morning, and the stone rolls away.

Jesus came and stood in the room. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them. Though Jesus had been crucified, here he is, he is risen. The first words of Jesus to the disciples in the resurrection are "Peace be with you." *Peace be with you* can be an ordinary greeting, but from the lips of Jesus to the disciples in this moment, it carries the full freight. The word for peace is *eirene*, but you'll likely be more familiar with the Hebrew word for peace: *Shalom*.

Shalom, peace, appears in the Old Testament over 300 times. The root of *shalom* is a similar-sounding word *shalam*. *Shalam* is the root of *shalom*. *Shalam* is making right what is wrong through restitution. For example, if you kill a man's ox, for *shalam*, you replace the man's ox. That's making restitution, making things right. *Shalam* assigns quantifiable means to enact human justice. Repair what is broken. Replace what you broke or restore what you stole. If you steal a man's sheep, you *shalam* by restoring it four-fold. That's the mechanism—the means by which people who have had wrong done to them and suffered because of it are made right, somehow made whole by the instrument of restitution. This is called *shalam*.

But the Hebrew people always knew *shalam*--no matter how perfectly practiced it might be—does not equal *shalom*. *Shalam* doesn't fix everything. They had a word that goes beyond *shalam*. That's *shalom*, a peace that goes beyond ceasefire; justice beyond restitution; *shalom* is where our souls are knitted together. It's *shalom* where beyond restitution, we practice forgiveness. *Shalom* is renovation of the soul; it is grace; it's restoration; it's renewal. It's what we need to repair what's broken deep down. That is a gift of God, and it's from God.

Jesus, who was crucified and buried, comes and stands among them and his first word to his friends whose whole world is shattered inside and out is this grace: *shalom*. They received from him what only he could give—the gift of grace for their sins of the past, comfort in the fear of the present moment, and assurance for what is yet to come. They were hardly in a place to hear this word, which means they were exactly in the place where they needed it the most. They needed it for all that had happened, and they needed it for all they were about to be asked to do. Go into all the world. Leave this room. Unlock the door of the room and your heart to God and to one another and to Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, make disciples of all nations.

Shalom is inner wholeness; it's completeness in mind and body and spirit and relationship. It's what half the self-help shelves at the bookstore put on offer, but it is even more. Because *shalom* doesn't just restore you, the *shalom* of God renews you beyond even who you were before.

When we step out of ourselves and the limitations we believe we have,
 when we risk something big for something good,
 when we discover life from the ashes of death,
 when we offer forgiveness in the pain,
 when we restore broken relationships,
 when we extend grace even from our suffering,
 when we receive grace even in our shame,
 when we step in courage and faith,

we participate in the *shalom* made possible by resurrection. And everything changes. The molecules in the air change. The room changes.

Those individuals who slid the bolt to unlock the door and left that room were not the same people they were when they entered it. Their place of refuge became the place of transformation because of their encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Even Peter. Even Thomas. They went in afraid, shamed, uncertain, doubting. They came out with this gift of *shalom* with one another and with God and within themselves. And that empowered them. And watch out: when Jesus meets a people and gives them peace and sends them to a great mission, watch out. Anything is possible. The world can change.

A single congregation in its place can't possibly do everything to embody the fullness of resurrection *shalom* in all the world. It's not possible, and it's not supposed to be possible. Just like no one disciple from that day forward was the only herald of the gospel. Every Christian community has its place in the great story, and we have ours. We have ours to live into, and your part in it is beautifully, and invitationally related to this place and its gift that it has been to one another and to the wider community. We are entering a season when our part in this place is not just to receive but to give. It's a big mission. It's a big ask. But it's good and worth our sacrifices. And it continues what God has done in this place for years and will for years to come for this to be a place of renewal of the human spirit and the community of faith, hope, and love in Christ.

This is a place of deep *shalom*, where the grounds and the buildings greet each of us with the peace of Sabbath each Sunday, saying to us, “Whatever your week is like, may you end the week with a rest that brings an inner peace that recenters us on the One who gives it. And may your next week begin with that sense of inner rest and wholeness, where nothing is lacking.”

This is a place for children to play and climb trees and learn to garden a little bit. And learn they are loved.

This is a place for friendship over unhurried conversations.

A place to get away for a minute by yourself for a quiet walk or with hundreds singing together *Christ the Lord is risen today. Alleluia.*

A place to receive from the oaks of faith who have gone before, and a place to plant seeds for those to come.

A place to receive graciously and give generously.

A place of arriving and being sent, and possibly, by grace, being transformed.

And above all and in all else, a place to meet Jesus, standing amongst us, in those places in life that seemed impossible to redeem. There he is, and the door begins to open again. That’s the Easter season. And that’s Sabbath. And that’s today.

May you know the peace of Christ.

May you have a place to receive and give Christ’s peace.

May you love that place and know you are loved.

May your love be wide enough for all the world to hear the invitation:

 Come and see.

 Come and receive.

 Come, and give your life away.

Amen.