

Peace Be with You

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Gospel reading. **Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”** Here ends our text.

“Well, he’s gone. No more Shepherd for the sheep. I guess we have to take the keys, lock the doors, and shut the Church down.” This despairing thought may have passed through the disciples’ minds after Jesus’ death. After all, Jesus was their Good Shepherd, their leader, their teacher. He had called them to be his disciples. They believed in him, left everything, and followed him. They heard Jesus preach numerous sermons with parables that applied Law and Gospel. They watched him perform miraculous signs of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and raising the dead. They saw his compassion upon the poor, the destitute, and spurned of society. They were part of the 72 whom Jesus sent out two by two to prepare his way in the towns and villages. They saw the masses come to Jesus like sheep to their shepherd and heard them sing his praises of “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” Over their three years of training, the disciples walked with Jesus, ate with him, and slept under the stars with him. They’d gotten to know him personally, intimately. Jesus was their Lord and Master but also their good friend. But now Jesus was gone. He’d left them. It seemed almost willfully.

Jesus had told them that he’d be leaving them, but now that it had finally happened, they were shocked. Maybe they even felt a little betrayed. What were they to do now? This whole gathering of about 120 followers had been centered around Jesus, but now that he was gone, what was the point of continuing this little church? And so out of fear, the disciples took the keys, locked the doors, and shut the church down.

About two months ago, I told our congregation that I had received a Call to another church. This caused a little trepidation among our board of elders. A few weeks later I announced that I’d accepted this Call and would soon be leaving you. This all came as quite a shock to you and to me. After all, just like Jesus called me to three years of training at the seminary, so he also called me to serve as your pastor. For the last eight years I’ve been your shepherd, your teacher, and servant. You’ve heard me preach numerous sermons with stories and application of Law and Gospel. You’ve watched me perform miraculous signs of baptizing babies to wash away sins and consecrate the Communion elements to give you the Lord’s body and blood. You’ve seen me show compassion to the sick, the shut-in, and the grieving. I’ve buried our dead. We’ve worked side by side together in mission and ministry to bring the masses to our church and school. We’ve gotten to know each other personally. Though I’m your pastor and shepherd, I’ve also become your friend. But next Sunday, I’ll be gone, and it seems by my own choosing. Maybe some of you feel a little betrayed. “I was counting on this pastor to confirm my children, commune my aging parents, or even bury me. What do we do now?”

Now there are many churches whose pastors have left them. They took another Call, retired, or died in office. For a long-term pastorate, the entire church seemed to be centered on this one man, and now he’s gone. For congregations that are just limping along like the disciples, there’s often despair, anxiety about the future, and even thoughts of giving up. What’s the point of continuing this little church without a shepherd? Some churches out of fear, take the keys, lock the doors, and shut the church down.

But thanks be to God, the Church isn’t centered on the pastor. He’s just the sheepdog who helps the shepherd herd the sheep. The Church is gathered around the risen Jesus Christ and centered upon him. He’s our Good Shepherd who knows us each by name and will never leave us nor forsake us.

Yes, after Jesus died, the disciples were greatly troubled. Out of fear, they took the keys and locked the doors. They were shutting the church down. But then the risen Jesus passed through the locked doors and stood among them. He calmed their fears and said, **“Peace be with you.”** To show that he wasn’t a ghost or an imposter, Jesus showed them the scars on his hands and side. The disciples recognized their Good Shepherd and were glad when they saw the Lord. Their anxiety and agitated hearts were changed to calm and peace. **Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And**

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when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” As God the Father sent his Son to be the Good Shepherd of his Church, so Jesus was now sending his apostles to be his under shepherds for his Church. But Jesus wasn’t sending them out alone. He breathed on them the Holy Spirit who strengthened their faith in his words. And Jesus wasn’t sending them out empty handed. He gave them a different set of keys. Not keys that would lock doors and close churches, but keys that would lock and unlock the chains of sin. Jesus gave his Church the Office of the Keys, also called Confession and Absolution. With these keys the apostles would continue their little church and begin new ones. The Holy Spirit came upon the apostles again at Pentecost to embolden their preaching and bestow upon them the gift of speaking the Gospel in other human tongues. In all languages, they preached Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins. The Good Shepherd used his under shepherds to add to his Church that day. About 3,000 believers received the Word of God and were baptized. The Holy Christian Church wasn’t closing its doors and shutting down but opening its doors and rising up.

Yes, after I announced my departure, you may have felt troubled or anxious or maybe relieved. But I stand among you today and say, “Peace be with you.” You reply, “And also with you.” And like you, I am at peace. Though I was initially troubled and torn when I received another Call, I found peace in the Lord. Through this congregation, the Holy Spirit called me to be your pastor, and through another congregation the same Holy Spirit has called me to serve there. Jesus sent me to Darmstadt, and now he’s sending me to Valparaiso. While here at Trinity, the Good Shepherd has blessed me as your under shepherd. I’ve been blessed to serve the congregation that raised me in the Christian faith. I was baptized here at this fount, went to Lutheran elementary school across the drive, and was confirmed at this altar. God has let me serve some of my teachers, sponsors, and role models who taught me the faith here. Last year I enjoyed celebrating our church’s anniversary of 175 years of God’s grace among us. But what I have enjoyed most of all is using the Office of the Keys which Christ gives to his Church for me to administer on his behalf. What a joy it’s been for me to absolve your sins publicly and privately. What a joy it’s been to teach and preach Christ’s saving message of the Gospel to you. What a joy it’s been to place the Lord’s body and blood into your hands for your forgiveness. What a joy it’s been to bless you in the name of the Lord. What a joy it’s been to pronounce, “The peace of the Lord be with you all.”

And like me, you are at peace. No one’s talking about locking the doors and closing the church. The Lord is with you! Our board of elders has already begun the process of calling another pastor for our congregation. The Good Shepherd already has in mind the under shepherd he plans to send to you. Jesus is still breathing his Spirit on his disciples and sending them out to forgive the sins of the repentant. The Holy Spirit will work through the means of his Church to call your next pastor. And when he’s installed, you’ll hand him the keys. You’ll give him the keys to the church and school and office. But you’ll also hand him the Office of the Keys to administer publicly on your behalf. As a servant of the Word, He’ll stand in the stead and by the command of Jesus to forgive all your sins. Unlike the disciples who saw the risen Jesus, you don’t see Jesus. Unlike the disciples who heard Jesus’ voice, you don’t hear Jesus speak. Unlike the disciples who touched his body and felt the scars in his hands and side, you don’t touch Jesus. You only see his under shepherd, hear his voice, and touch the bread and wine of Holy Communion. But Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus blesses you who have not seen, heard, or touched him and yet have believed in him. Trinity Lutheran Darmstadt isn’t closing its doors and shutting down but opening its doors and rising up.

Jesus said of his apostles whom he sent to forgive and retain sins, “Whoever hears you, hears me. Whoever receives you, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives him who sent me.” Thank you for receiving me as your pastor, and blessed are you for receiving your next pastor. For as you receive Christ’s under shepherd, you also receive the Good Shepherd and thereby receive God the Father who sent him. Through your pastor’s administration of Word and Sacrament, the Lord Jesus comes and stands among you and says, “Peace be with you.” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.