

Dear Christian friends,

Henry W. Longfellow, in his famous poem-turned-Christmas-carol *“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,”* laments that the hope of peace announced by the angels on Christmas Day was not fulfilled. He wrote in the not so familiar fourth verse:

*And in despair I bowed my head
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”*

It’s easy for us to doubt that peace too, isn’t it? It’s easy for us to think that the Prince of Peace failed to accomplish his mission when we look at the world today. Watch or read the news sometime: burnings, bombings, shootings, hostages, chants of hatred....and that’s just in US -one of the “safest” nations on earth - much less the rest of the world.

But the Gospel lesson for today does not leave us clinging to unfulfilled ideals. No, *In the Face of Doubt*, the Gospel assures us that the peace announced by angels on Christmas Day *was won* by Jesus and *announced* to his disciples, in a most reassuring way, on Easter evening. And so today, let us put aside our doubt and concentrate on true peace. And as...

Peace. Now that was something the disciples certainly didn’t have. Oh, they had questions, concerns, fears. But peace? No, they had no peace. The Jews had already crucified their master...how long until the Jews would come after them? And if that wasn’t enough to worry about remember it had only been four days since they saw the mob coming to arrest Jesus, and they scattered like the sheep they were. They had abandoned their Master. Of the two among them who were brave enough to follow the crowd, one ended up denying that he even

knew Jesus. And as Jesus hung on the cross, only the other one of those disciples dared to go and join the women on Mt. Calvary. Shame hung heavily upon their shoulders—guilt weighed down their hearts. No, there was no peace for them—only fear, grief and guilt.

But then, something amazing happened. Our text says, ***On the evening of the 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.*** Suddenly, the man whom they had abandoned to crucifixion and death stood before them. He simply appeared right in the middle of their group. And as our Savior stood in front of the disciples, he opened his mouth and spoke these most reassuring words to them--He said, ***Peace be with you.***

Think about that! What wonderful words came from the lips of our Savior. To his sorrowful, guilt-ridden disciples, Jesus speaks these words of pardon and absolution. He doesn’t talk about their abandonment; he doesn’t mention their all too apparent fear for their own skins. No, rather, he offers them the olive branch of the Gospel—he offers them peace.

But that wasn’t enough for the disciples. Have you ever really hurt somebody, and later, when you apologize they say, *“Don’t worry about it.”* Yet, deep down, you wonder what they’re really thinking—you wonder if they will ever *really* forgive and forget... How could Jesus ever *just forget* about what these disciples had done? And to bring it closer to home, how could Jesus ever *just forget* about everything that we’ve done?

How many times haven’t we abandoned and ignored Christ to satisfy our own desires? How many times haven’t we failed to confess Christ in order to “save face” with our friends or coworkers? Do you have peace? Are you at peace with your actions? Jesus says you should be. But sometimes that’s not enough to calm our troubled

consciences is it? Too often we doubt that Jesus could forgive such a sinner as me.

He clearly says, ***Be at peace***. But it can't be that easy, right? We end up waiting for something to happen. We end up waiting for him to get even. I mean, that's not peace, is it? Simply saying, ***Be at peace***, sounds too simple, doesn't it? Well, you're right. That is too simple. And if our peace was based merely on words it would be, at best, only temporary. It couldn't be that easy...and so we live *In the Face of Doubt*.

That's exactly why Jesus went farther than just offering this *word* of peace. He didn't just say, "*Don't worry about it!*" Listen to the next verse of our text: ***After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side***. After offering the disciples pardon, Jesus holds up his hands to show the holes opened by the heavy nails. He pulls back his shirt, to point out the gash in his side from the stab of a Roman lance.

He pointed to these wounds, to show his fledgling church that he *had* provided them with the great gift of peace. For these were the glorious marks that signified the work he had come to do. Through his pierced hands and riven side, Christ had provided payment for sin. That's the peace he came to provide. That's the peace the angels were announcing on Christmas: Peace between you and God...peace for your troubled consciences.

Brothers and sisters, look at those wounds. God didn't just sweep your sins under the rug! God doesn't just say, "*Don't worry about it,*" and leave you wondering when he's going to get his revenge. God took your sins, put them on Christ's back, and punished him in your place... And because of that—because of those pierced hands and that wounded side, God remembers your sins no more. They've been paid for. Think about that. The slate is wiped clean. It's the ultimate forgive and forget. The wounds of Christ promise you that God no longer sees your sins. Our Savior has taken them away.

All that guilt that weighs upon your heart, all that doubt you live with—Christ says, "*Give it to me. Look at hands and my side. It's paid for. Let go of the guilt, let go of the doubt and in its place, put MY peace.*" And that's a material point: Jesus says, MY peace.

You see, just because we're Christians doesn't mean our lives will always be perfect. It doesn't mean that we'll always be at peace in a worldly sense. On the contrary, this world is always going to be filled with wars, murder, problems, and hostility. But the peace we have isn't this world's peace that is so fleeting and elusive. Our peace is true, lasting peace. Our peace comes from knowing that we are God's dear children—bought at the price of his own blood. Your peace comes from knowing that he's promised to love you, guide you, and protect you no matter what happens. Peace like that is certain—even *in the face of doubt*.

When Christ was born in Bethlehem, angel hosts sang their glorious song to the shepherds—the song that said, ***Peace on earth***. That was a promise made. When Christ arose from the grave, having paid for sin and conquered death, he appeared to his disciples and said, ***Peace be with you***. That was proof of the promise fulfilled. Doubts of peace on earth may creep into your minds. Doubts of peace between you and God may creep into your hearts. But when they do, look to your risen Savior and his wounds. Say with Longfellow in his final verse of "*I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*":

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men."*

God has granted it. Peace is yours.
Amen.

And this peace of God which transcends...