

THE HANDS OF THE PASSION¹

Life-Giving Hands

Jesus lives! The victory's won! Dear souls alive in Christ:

It's hard to believe in our culture that something so popular can be so devastating to the health and wellbeing of so many people. And like so many destructive movements in the past, most victims don't even realize what has happened to them. We're not talking about a virus here. It's social media.

Don't get me wrong. It's exciting the way you can pick almost any subject and get free, professional instruction whether it's cooking, mechanics, woodworking or tree felling. The damage is done where folks you admire or just plain envy seem to have a life so great and so exciting that you're left feeling like your life is a mess. "Into every life a little rain must fall," but does yours feel like a monsoon mudslide after reading certain FaceBook book pages? Doesn't matter what platform, how could anyone feel better to read about someone's love life if she's separated from her husband? Dead end job, kids gone bonkers blaming you for family and marriage problems? Who wouldn't feel trapped and useless?

Idealism of youth, midlife crisis, burnout from the 40-year grind, or golden years in a sandpit – we all go through cycles where we feel it's time to start *really* living. Maybe backpacking through Europe? A high powered, overpriced European convertible cruising the Pacific highway? Or forget the car and cruise the Mediterranean. Will adventures *really* make you live? "Suck out all the marrow of life," like Henry David Thoreau? But why do feel-good trips feel so empty when you land on the shores of reality?

In God's love letter, the Bible, "life" is given as *the enjoyment of God's blessings*. *Really* living doesn't involve a backpack, BMW, or borrowing the bank. Christians need no midlife crisis or end-of-life burnout to trigger a life worth living. We just need Easter. We need the empty tomb. We need the joyful shouts, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed." We need Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the upper room with his **Life-Giving Hands** that make life worth *really* living in peace, joy, and purpose.

The real enemy of peace is fear. And the disciples had it in every chamber of their heart. John tells us, "***On the evening of that first day of the week [Easter], the disciples were together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews.***" (v.19 EHV²) If their fellow Jews were so corrupt as to arrange the crucifixion of an innocent man, what would stop them from coming after his disciples next? Seventy-two hours earlier, they had abandoned Jesus and fled the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus was arrested. Peter disowned him, just as Jesus predicted. And in spite of all Jesus' work preparing them for months, they were still shocked that He died on the cross Friday afternoon. They were acting as if Jesus were still dead, and their lives not worth living. They were imprisoned by guilt and fear in that upper room.

No longer letting Himself be limited by time and space, Jesus is in His State of Exaltation, back in full use of all His divine power and glory as God. He knows exactly how they feel. His infinite love wants to calm their fears. Suddenly, Jesus is standing among them without coming through the locked doors. He doesn't ask, "How's life?" but offers this instead: "***Peace be with you.***" They had seen the empty tomb. They'd heard the reports of the women and the Emmaus disciples, but most of them had not seen Jesus with their own eyes. They weren't sure what to make of Easter until Jesus was standing right there, showing himself alive in person, using His **Life-Giving Hands** to relieve their fear with divine peace. "Guys, it's me! I'm not a ghost. I'm not dead. I'm standing right in front of you, very much alive."

¹ Adapted from NPH 2021 Lent: *The Hands of the Passion* by Adam Mueller and Steven Pagels.

² EHV ~ *Evangelical Heritage Version* (<http://wartburgproject.org>) © 2019. NPH: 800-662-6022, Amazon-Kindle, LOGOS.

“After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” His **Life-Giving Hands** convinced them. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Witness that the women thought Jesus was dead, that they needed to anoint His body. Emmaus disciples finally recognized Jesus breaking bread, then raced back seven miles to Jerusalem. ***“We also have the completely reliable prophetic word. You do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the Morning Star rises in your hearts.”*** (2 Peter 1:19) This world is a dark place, filled with doubt and disappointment, guilt and grief, punishment and pain, death and despair. Ever wish you could join the disciples behind locked doors? On Good Friday the whole world went dark when God laid on Christ the iniquity of us all, our anguish, the ugliness of this evil world.

But today marks three days from Friday. Christ is alive! At last the disciples grabbed hold of Easter! ***“The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”*** (v.20 NIV84) Not dark unbelief, but Easter joy makes life *really* worth living. Have you grabbed hold of Easter joy? The gloomy world died on Good Friday, and so did the darkness of sin and all the nagging guilt. Easter peace follows joy into your soul: ***“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:19) Jesus conquered sin. Defeated the devil. Rose victorious over death itself. This Easter, grab hold of Jesus’ joy that makes your life *really* worth living.

But then what? God did not design humans to live like hopeless hermits. Jesus’ **Life-Giving Hands** replaced His disciples’ hopelessness with a life-giving mission. ***Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you! Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you.”*** We’ve been marveling 40 days of Lent at Jesus’ unflinching determination to fulfill His mission to redeem the world. In the same way the Father sent Jesus, he now sends us, his disciples (*followers*) and transforms us into apostles (*sent out to proclaim*). ***“God ...has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, inasmuch as God is making an appeal through us. We urge you, on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:19f) Christ’s ambassadors! That’s life *really* worth living.

And that’s a big job! Overwhelming – when relatives ask questions about heaven or your peace, joy and hope in hard times? Jesus promises that we do not go alone. ***“He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”*** Along with faith the Holy Spirit empowers and enables each of us to carry out God’s call, ***“As the Father sent me, I’m sending you.”*** Fifty days later, the Holy Spirit came so powerfully on these disciples that he turned uneducated Galilean fishermen into apostolic fishers of men. He used Peter’s Pentecost sermon to catch in 3,000 souls for the Christian church that day.

Trained apostles proclaim Jesus’ message: ***“Whenever you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*** Remember your folks giving you a house key? Or car keys? Here Jesus confidently hands every believer the keys to heaven. Forgiving sins opens heaven. Withholding forgiveness from those who reject Christ or are plainly impenitent locks the door to heaven. The Keys are the special power and privilege Christ gives only to Christians. Forgiving sins and announcing peace is what Jesus did on Easter when he showed the disciples his **Life-Giving Hands**. Daily offer your hands for God’s life-giving purpose—to forgive our brothers and sisters. Forgiving the sins of your estranged spouse. Reconciling with a coworker or church member. Resolving differences with an old friend. Keys are valuable only when you use them. So use what God gave you! Living at peace with God and your neighbor makes life *really* worth living.

Miraculously Jesus’ **Life-Giving Hands** gave His disciples peace, joy and purpose as He sent them on his life-giving mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit with his forgiving Keys. Two billion Christians today owe a debt of gratitude for the church’s humble beginnings that Easter evening. Trusting in Jesus’ forgiveness, you can open heaven to others too! Why stay stuck? Jesus lives! Act like it. Pray like it. Embrace his call, ***“I am sending you.”*** Your mission: Bring the gospel to the other five and half billion people in our world one soul at a time. Receive his Holy Spirit and use the Keys to scatter the darkness of unbelief with holy joy. Christ conquered death. Easter makes life *really* worth living. Amen.