

My God How Great Thou Art

John 20:21-23

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

The title comes from the hymn “How Great Thou Art.” The hymn writer extols God’s greatness in a number of ways. He begins with God’s hand in nature and concludes with Christ’s second coming.

Our text above is a reason for the bursting out in song of this hymn. The setting is the day of Christ’s resurrection (Easter evening). The disciples were in hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews who had crucified Jesus.

When Jesus appeared to them they would have been reminded of how they betrayed him and ran away when He most needed them. Jesus would not have been blamed if He had scolded them for their forsaking Him.

BUT, He didn’t! Instead, He greeted them with “peace be with you!” Then Jesus did what might be unthinkable from a human point of view. Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit. It is the giving of the Spirit for a specific purpose—in this case in connection with the establishment of the Office of the Keys: to forgive the sins of those who repent and retain the sins of those who refuse to repent. It is *still* exercised in our church and shut-in services. In the face of their doubt and fear, Jesus comforts. How great is that?

The disciples were not the first people in the Bible to be afraid and have doubts. Many of the great names of the Old Testament were hesitant when God came to them with requests to lead the Israelites. But, God strengthened them and used them to carry His will forward. It is from this imperfect nation that Jesus was born into, and saved the world from, its sins. And, it was from these imperfect disciples that the Good News of salvation was spread over the whole world. In face of their doubt and fear, He empowered. How great is that?

We, too, have doubts and fears. We, too, are far from perfect. We learned from our catechism days that “we daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment.” But, we also learned that Christ died for our and the sins of the whole world. The Lord has moved them from us as far the east is west.

And, the Lord uses us to do great things in the world by caring for our loved ones, connecting with others who are facing scary times, and sharing our faith with those who the Lord has placed in our presence. In place of our doubt and fear, He strengthens our faith and makes us His witnesses. How great is that?

Thank you, Lord, for not giving us what we deserve, but, instead, forgiving our sins. Please strengthen our faith during difficult times. Take away our doubt and fear and give us the assurance of your constant presence not matter what comes into our life. Amen.