On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the disciples had gathered together and locked the doors of the place for fear of the Jewish authorities. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you.” And after he said this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.”

The verses we have now read contain things hard to be understood. Like all the events which followed our Lord’s resurrection, there is much in the facts before us which is mysterious, and requires reverent handling. Our Lord’s actions, in suddenly appearing among the disciples when the doors were closed, and in breathing upon them, might soon draw us into unprofitable speculation. It is easy, in such cases, to darken counsel by words without knowledge. We shall find it safer and wiser to confine our attention to points which are plain and instructive.

We should observe, for one thing, the remarkable language with which our Lord greeted the apostles, when He first met them after His resurrection. Twice over he addressed them with the kindly words, “Peace be unto you.” We may dismiss as untenable, in all probability, the cold and cautious suggestion, that this was nothing better than an unmeaning phrase of courtesy. He who “spoke as never man spoke,” said nothing without meaning. He spoke, we may be sure, with special reference to the state of mind of the eleven apostles, with special reference to the events of the last few days, and with special reference to their future ministry. “Peace” and not blame—“peace” and not fault-finding—“peace” and not rebuke—was the first word which this little company heard from their Master’s lips, after He left the tomb.

It was right and fitting, that it should be so, and in full harmony with things that had gone before. “Peace on earth” was the song of the heavenly host, when Christ was born. Peace and rest of soul, was the general subject that Christ continually preached for three years. Peace, and not riches, had been the great legacy which He had left with the eleven the night before His crucifixion. Surely it was in full keeping with all the tenor of our Lord’s dealings, that, when He revisited His little company of disciples after His resurrection, His first word should be "Peace." It was a word that would soothe and calm their minds.

Peace, we may safely conclude, was intended by our Lord to be the key-note to the Christian ministry. That same peace which was so continually on the lips of the Master, was to be the grand subject of the teaching of His disciples. Peace between God and man through the precious blood of atonement—peace between man and man through the infusion of grace and charity—to spread such peace as this was to be the work of the Church. Any religion, like that of Mahomet, who made converts with the sword, is not from above, but from beneath. Any form of Christianity which burns men at the stake, in order to promote its own success, carries about with it the stamp of an apostasy. That is the truest and best religion which does most to spread real, true peace.

We should observe, for another thing, in these verses, the remarkable evidence which our Lord supplied of His own resurrection. He graciously appealed to the senses of His trembling disciples. He showed them "His hands and His side." He bade them see with their own eyes, that He had a real material body, and that He was not a spirit or a spirit. "Handle Me and see," were His words, according to Luke—"a spirit has not flesh and bone, as you see Me have." Great indeed was the condescension of our blessed Master, in thus coming down to the feeble faith of the eleven Apostles! But great also was the principle which He established for the use of His Church in every age, until He returns. That principle is, that our Master requires us to believe nothing is contrary to our senses. Things above our reason we must expect to find in a religion that comes from God, but not things contrary to reason.

Let us lay firm hold on this great principle, and never forget to use it. Specially let us take care that we use it, in estimating the effect of the sacraments and the work of the Holy Spirit. To require people to believe that men have the quickening power of the Holy Spirit, when our eyes tell us they are living in habitual carelessness and sin, or that the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper are Christ’s real body and blood, when our senses tell us they are still bread and wine—this is to require more belief than Christ ever required of His disciples. It is to require that which is flatly contradictory to reason and common sense. Such requisitions Christ never made. Let us not try to be wiser than our Lord.

We should observe, lastly, in these verses, the remarkable commission which our Lord conferred upon His eleven Apostles. We are told that He said, “Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you. And after he said
this, he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.” It is vain to deny that the true sense of these solemn words has been for centuries a subject of controversy and dispute. It is useless perhaps to expect that the controversy will ever be closed. The utmost that we can hope to do with the passage is to supply a probable exposition.

It seems then highly probable that our Lord in this place solemnly commissioned His Apostles to go into all the world, and preach the Gospel as He had preached it. He also conferred on them the power of declaring with peculiar authority whose sins were forgiven, and whose sins were not forgiven. That this is precisely what the Apostles did is a simple matter of fact, which any one may verify for himself by reading the book of the Acts. When Peter proclaimed to the Jews, “Repent, and be converted,”--and when Paul declared at Antioch of Iconium--”to you is the word of this salvation sent”--”Through this man is preached the forgiveness of sins, and by Him all that believe are justified”--they were doing what this passage commissioned the Apostles to do. They were opening with authority the door of salvation, and inviting with authority all sinners to enter in by it and be saved. (Acts 3:19; 13:26-38.) It seems, on the other hand, most improbable that our Lord intended in this verse to sanction the practice of private absolution, after private confession of sins.

Whatever some may please to say, there is not a single instance to be found in the Acts of any Apostle using such absolution after confession. Above all, there is not a trace in the two pastoral Epistles to Timothy and Titus, of such confession and absolution being recommended, or thought desirable. In short, whatever men may say about private priestly absolution, there is not a single precedent for it in God’s Word.

Let us leave the whole passage with a deep sense of the importance of the minister’s office, when that office is duly exercised according to the mind of Christ. No higher honor can be imagined than that of being Christ’s ambassadors, and proclaiming in Christ’s name the forgiveness of sins to a lost world. But let us ever beware of investing the ministerial office with one jot more of power and authority than Christ conferred upon it. To treat ministers as being in any sense mediators between God and man, is to rob Christ of His prerogative, to hide saving truth from sinners, and to exalt ordained men to a position which they are totally unqualified to fill.