

Believing Is Seeing

John 20:19-31

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

April 7, 2013 – The Second Sunday of Easter



Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I don't know about you, but every time I read this morning's Gospel I wonder how Thomas could have been such a dunderhead. As a follower of Christ, he should have known what was going on – yet, when Jesus was put to death, everything seems to have changed. All Thomas could see was darkness, disappointment and death. His Lord had been crucified, dead, and buried, and it must have appeared to him that his world had fallen apart. No matter what the others told him, he simply would not believe Jesus had risen from the dead! But was what happened to Thomas all that different from the sudden turns and catastrophes that sometimes afflict you? One moment everything seems fine, then suddenly it's shattered hopes, dreams and doubt. So there's no point for you to single out Thomas, because all of us are doubters. For all kinds of reasons, in so many different ways, we all doubt the words, promises, and blessings of God. We do this because we're sinners – and doubt is the most basic, fundamental sin of all. It was the sin of Adam and Eve, who doubted and disobeyed God's Word – and it's this same lack of faith that's the driving force behind every sin that's ever been committed since.

How often have you missed out on the peace, joy and confidence you ought to be enjoying in the knowledge that God always looks out for and takes care of His children? How often do your doubts cause you to be fearful of sickness, death, uncertainty or sometimes even life itself? How frequently do you lock yourself up in your own little room of doubt, self-pity and fear? Could this not lead you to question God's mercy, or be skeptical of His grace? Of course it could – and it does! Might such questioning ultimately even convince you that God doesn't care – or that perhaps He doesn't even exist? Even the great Reformer, Martin Luther, struggled with such doubts, so you shouldn't be all that surprised when doubts visit and haunt you.

So what about this story concerning Thomas? What are we to make of it? As self-centered sinners, our initial tendency is probably to focus on him – first on his sinful doubting, and then on his faithful confession – but *only* as a warning and an example so that we don't fall into the same sin, right? Not really. In fact, that entirely misses the point! Since Holy Scripture is concerned primarily with revealing Christ, if you want to

know what *this* story is all about, then your focus must also be on Christ – on His response to Thomas, the Twelve, and to us. This incident begins with Thomas speaking these words: “Unless *I* see in His hands the print of the nails, and put *my* finger into His side, *I* will not believe!” And then Jesus says to Thomas: “Look at My hands. Touch My wounds. Put your hands here into My side. Be no longer doubting, but believing.” And isn't that what Jesus does for His people today? He responds to our doubts with the very same compassion He showed Thomas and the others – with the very same love that took Him to the Cross – with the very same forgiveness He there won for us all. He comes to you – locked up inside your own little room of doubt, worry and fear – and He gives you His peace.

He doesn't scold you for doubting. Rather, He comes to ease your doubts and strengthen your faith with His forgiveness. And as one who shares the doubts of Thomas – you ought to find great comfort in *this* fact – that poor, “Doubting Thomas” is *not* remembered by the Church for his doubting, but rather as one of the sainted Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. The flesh and blood of Jesus were more than sufficient to assuage Thomas' doubts and replace them with the faith and Spirit of God. Therefore Thomas didn't die in unbelief, despair or shame, but in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection. And so today Jesus comes to us because faithful St. Thomas was the first among many who were, are, and will be sent out into the world and into the Church with the preaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments of Christ.

Indeed, that's the meaning of the word, “Apostle.” It means quite simply “one who is sent.” In Biblical times an “Apostle” was one who had been sent as the personal ambassador or legal representative of another – meaning that those who received an Apostle of Christ, were, in fact, receiving Christ Himself. That was why Jesus said to His Apostles, “He who hears you, hears Me; and he who receives you, receives Me.” Through the Apostolic Ministry of sinful, doubting men like Thomas, Christ Himself has continued to come among His people with the mercy of His nail-scarred hands and spear-pierced side, so that sinners such as ourselves might receive the eternal life and salvation Christ earned for us all with His suffering, death and resurrection. Everything Jesus brings and delivers through the ministry of His Church has been summed up in the

words He spoke to Thomas and the others: “Peace be with you!” It’s a common liturgical greeting taken from the Jewish synagogue, but it’s filled with new meaning and content on account of Christ’s resurrection. That’s why when these words are spoken in the Liturgy today, they actually create the very peace they describe in the ears of all who hear them in faith.

That’s why you come to Church – not simply to obey God’s Law to “Sanctify the Holy Day” – but because as a Christian you need to hear the Gospel as much, or more, than anyone. You need the peace of God’s forgiveness in Christ, for we all daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment. That’s why you come to hear the Word of the Gospel, to partake of the Holy Supper of Christ’s body and blood, and bring your children to be Baptized – so that you might be strengthened in your faith and, above all else, receive new life and the forgiveness of sins in Christ. The word used here in this text to describe Jesus’ breathing the Spirit upon His Disciples, is a word used nowhere else in the New Testament. But it’s the word Moses used in the book of Genesis to describe how God breathed His Spirit into Adam. And just as God’s breath gave physical life to all who descended from Adam, so now also Christ’s breath creates new life in all who receive the Ministry of His Apostles – the Ministry of our Savior Himself. In this very hour – in this very place – Christ is working in His Church, breathing His Spirit into His people by Means of His Gospel and Sacraments.

As our Lord attests, we “who have not seen” have been blessed with faith in Christ – not because we’ve been convinced by the evidence and chose to believe – but *solely* because the Spirit of Christ has granted us faith in the preaching of the Gospel, in the waters of Holy Baptism, and in the body and blood of God’s Son. We are not blessed because we believe, rather, we believe because we’ve been blessed with God’s peace – a peace that’s entirely different from anything this life and world have to offer. Consider the disciples. They may have been able to overcome their fear of the Jews – especially after Pentecost – but many of the Jews made it their goal in life to get even with them for what they’d done in their proclamation of the Gospel. Lies were spread that they’d stolen the Lord’s body and made up the story of the Resurrection. They were accused of all sorts of false dealings – just as Christ Himself had been – so that they could hardly have been considered popular in the eyes of the world.

St. John would spend his last days exiled on the island of Patmos. And all the other Apostles would be murdered for their faithful witness. They, and all the early Christians, were persecuted for their faith. But Jesus hadn’t lied to them. They really did have peace, joy, and confidence. They knew that whatever this world offered – be it good or bad – it could never hold a candle to the eternal blessings of Christ. So they faced death with faith and gladness, knowing that heaven waited on the other side of the darkness. Now, like the disciples, your hope isn’t only for this life, either. There will always be bills to pay, sickness, disease, and finally death. There will still be fights and arguments with the ones you love the most. And there will always be failures and disappointments throughout the course of your life.

But through this faith which God has given us, you now possess the kind of peace, confidence, joy, and hope that *only* God can give. Regardless of what your outward situation might look like – and in spite of any feelings or emotions to the contrary – you know that because these things have been given to us by our Savior, no one can take them away. Because of Christ’s cross and resurrection you have the most important gifts of all – the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. So even in times of great doubt and deep depression – when you feel trapped, and nothing seems to be going right – even then, your confidence must be that the Lord has not forgotten or forsaken you.

He has washed you clean in the waters of Holy Baptism and made you His own. He stands before you regularly with the promise of His Gospel in the words of Holy Absolution, granting you the blessings of His peace. And He places into your mouth His very own body and blood, by which your sins are all forgiven. And in these precious Tokens He restores your faith and builds up your confidence. In these “Signs” you have nothing less than Christ Himself – and in Him, “that peace which passes understanding” – a peace that’s entirely different from the peace of this world – which abides in and causes your heart not to be troubled – which takes away your fear, and grants you everything God desires you to have in the name of His Son. May it always be so for His sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.