

Receiving God's Grace

John 20:19-31

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

April 12, 2015 – Second Sunday of Easter

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Grace to you, and peace, from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. It was late in the afternoon, just before sundown on that first Easter Sunday. The disciples were all gathered together in one place with the doors shut. It was fear that had brought them there that day – fear for their lives, their future, and a fear of those who had clamored for the crucifixion of Jesus. Surely those who killed the Lord would be after them next. It's strange that even after having heard the Good News of His resurrection – even though they had His promise that He would protect them – that they would still be afraid. What did they have to fear? If Jesus could conquer death, was there anything He couldn't overcome?

You and I, we have that very same knowledge, and yet, there are times when we're fearful. So, what is it you fear? What keeps you locked in, locked up, and locked away? Is it fear of violence, suffering, disease, or death? Is it fear of persecution, punishment, mockery, loneliness, or isolation? Fear is destructive. It limits you, locks you in on yourself, shuts you up in your own little room, and hides you away from one another. Fear can make your life a prison house – a fortress against what threatens all of us – both real and imagined. It might be your car, bedroom, work, a bar, or wherever you go to hide from others or from God. But fear is the fruit of unbelief – an inability or unwillingness to love and trust in God above all things. It's what happens when you place your confidence in things other than God.

But into that little fortress of fear, humbly and quietly, came our gentle, wounded Shepherd – once for sinners slain. The One who burst forth from the tomb without bothering to roll away the stone had no need to break down locked doors – or even knock on them. Would that fearful band of disciples have let Jesus in if He had knocked and waited for an invitation? Would any of you? I suspect that if we'd heard him knocking we would have asked who was there. And when we heard the voice on the other side saying: "It's, Me, Jesus." We'd answer: "Yeah, right! Would someone bolt the door, please, before that lunatic on the other side gets in?"

So, the Good Shepherd came to His sheep because His sheep weren't going to come to Him. He came as the Lamb who had given His life to save them, stood in their midst and spoke, saying: "Peace be with you." And in the midst of turmoil and unrest, His peace came to them – indeed, as it comes to us all. It came because

our Savior knows that in this world there is tribulation. He wants His Word to cheer us – to remind us that He's the One who has overcome the world. The Lamb of God who Himself conquered death by dying, had now come in peace to bring life. What comfort this Word must have brought to the disciples who had failed Jesus in His hour of need. Peter had denied Him three times. The others had abandoned him. None believed His words when He told them He would rise from the dead. Not one of them seems to have trusted Jesus with His own death – nor were any willing to trust Him with their life. Their hearts were filled with fear. Yet Jesus didn't speak harshly to them for their unbelief. He didn't chide them for their lack of faith. Instead, He came graciously to grant them His peace.

And the peace He brought is real peace – as real as His wounds, the nail marks on His hands, and the scar of the spear that pierced His side. It's from these rich wounds that the peace of Jesus comes. These wounds are the very wounds which healed the disease of sin and death which has been tormenting us all since the day of our birth. These are the wounds our Lord wants you to look at when your life is in turmoil – when you're threatened and filled with fear, locked up in your room, and despairing of life itself. These are the wounds from which the cleansing blood of God's Only Begotten Son flowed out upon the wood of the cross for you. These are the wounds in which He intends you to find true peace.

These are the wounds that mark Jesus as the crucified One spoken of from olden days – the One whose body would be nailed to the cross in fulfillment of God's Word. Here, standing before the disciples was no imposter or spiritualized phantom savior, but a genuine flesh and blood Jesus, newly risen from the dead. Seeing this they were "glad when they saw the Lord." Now, there was nothing left to fear. But is this not the very thing Jesus does for His disciples today? He presents those very same wounds to us in water, Word, body, and blood – and through these means shows forth for all to see the sacrifice that brought about our redemption. And in those tokens of His love He continues to bring us peace.

Now, for a second time, Jesus opened His mouth to speak. With His first Word He absolved His disciples and quenched their fear. With this second Word He sent them out to do the same for others. "As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you." As Jesus was sent by the Father to speak on His behalf, so also Jesus was

sending His disciples to speak on His behalf – to give out in His place the gifts He'd won by His death on the cross for a dying, damned world that refused to believe in Him. Next He said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit." With the breath of His mouth the heavens and all their host were made, dead clay had been turned into a living, breathing human being, and the dead bones in Ezekiel's vision had been made alive once again. God's breath and Word creates and renews. And so it is also with the Son of God through whom all things were made. With the life of His resurrection blowing across His holy lips, Christ our Lord now resuscitates His Church.

In a very real sense this event is a "little Pentecost" – a day which anticipated the big Pentecost which would come seven Sundays later – when Jesus would breathe upon His whole Church with the sound of a mighty, rushing wind. Here Jesus simply breathed His Spirit upon those He was sending out in His name to be His Apostles – that is, His pastors. It was their ordination day, when the Spirit was given so that they might speak the peace of Jesus' death and resurrection to others with the same authority and power Jesus spoke it to them.

Jesus breathed His Word and Spirit into His disciples so that it might be heard in His Church – the same Church to which He gave the power to forgive the sins of the penitent and retain the sins of those who refused to be forgiven. With His Word Christ gave His forgiveness to be their forgiveness. He put His disciples under holy orders so that they might deal decisively with sin by applying to it His saving death – for to be sure, dealing decisively with sin is what the Church is all about. It's a "mouth house" of forgiveness – forgiving the sins of those who wish to be rid of it, and retaining the sins of those who would rather die and be damned forever. With these words, Jesus leaves no doubt as to where the gifts of Easter are given out.

But Thomas wasn't with them on that first Easter. He hadn't come there to worship with the others. Poor Thomas! The one day He decided to play hooky, he missed out on the giving of the gifts. But the others had no intention of leaving Thomas impoverished. In their joy, they searched him out. And when they found him they said: "We have seen the Lord!" They didn't create a committee to go share this Good News with Thomas, they just did it. They didn't berate poor old Thomas for having missed Church – nor did they load a heap of guilt upon his head. They didn't ask: "Where were you last Sunday? We didn't see you in Church." Instead they told Him about the risen Lord and His gifts.

But Thomas didn't yet believe. He hadn't himself heard Jesus' words or seen His wounds. "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands, put my finger where the nails were, and place my hand into His side, I won't

believe," Thomas told them. Without the words and wounds of Jesus, he couldn't believe. And though we have a tendency to call him "Doubting Thomas," the fact of the matter is that faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ. For it's with His words, His wounds, His breath, and His Spirit, that Jesus creates faith and feeds it. So it was that the following Sunday Jesus' disciples were again gathered together. Again the doors were shut. Again they were set apart from the world – in a world by themselves. But this time Thomas was with them. Again Jesus appeared, speaking words of peace. Again He showed them His wounds, only this time He invited Thomas to touch them, to feel them, and to know that it was Him. "Be not doubting but believing," He told Him. And Thomas cried out: "My Lord and my God."

Perhaps you think you've never met Thomas, but may I say that whoever hasn't heard Jesus' words or seen His wounds is a Thomas to you. He's your unchurched neighbor, spouse, co-worker, family member or friend – anyone who is dying without the words and wounds of Jesus. This Thomas has to be sought out, called on, gathered into the room, and brought into the real presence of Christ. This person ought to be a concern to all who have had the privilege of reclining at Jesus' table, hearing His words, and handling His wounds.

And in a sense, you and I are also Thomases. After all, how many of you were there at Calvary when they crucified our Lord? Were any of you there on that First Day of the Week, when Jesus appeared to the other disciples – or on the second Sunday? Yet there's no reason to worry, for although you can't go to Jesus, He can come to you. In fact, there has never been a First Day of the Week when Jesus wasn't coming to His disciples. That's John's point. Every Sunday is an Easter Sunday, a First Day of the Week – that day when the crucified, risen Lord Jesus is present among His disciples with His words, wounds, breath and Spirit.

While you haven't ever seen Him, the fact is He's no less present now than He was for His disciples in that little locked room. Jesus Himself said: "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe." So in a manner of speaking, God has blessed you in your not seeing, for you still have His Word of forgiveness spoken to you and His Spirit breathed upon you. In the lowly forms of bread, wine, water and words, our Lord graciously gives you His gifts through the ministry of His Church so that you might also believe He is the Christ, the Son of God, the One who died and rose for us poor sinners – and believing that, have life in His name. Jesus is here among you even now with the gifts of His resurrection. May you always receive these gifts of His grace as the newborn babies He has made us all to be. In the name Jesus. 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.