

Face To Face With Life Itself

John 20:19-31

Trinity Lutheran Church

April 3, 2016 – Second Sunday of Easter

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In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Having just finished the seasons of Christmas, Epiphany and Lent – where we learned anew how God sent His Son, born of a Virgin, to suffer and die for the sin of the world – and now as we enter into the season of Easter where we rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ – the lengths to which God has gone to save us ought to be apparent to all. But as we move further into the season of Easter and on into Pentecost we'll be examining not only how God saves us, but also how He lifts us up in the faith, how He strengthens us, and how He enables us to go on living in this sinful world after having seen all the glories that await us in heaven. Our God, you see, isn't a God only for the future, He's also active in the lives of His people as they go about their day to day lives.

Consider this morning's Gospel. It was a Sunday evening. Only three days earlier Jesus had been crucified, died, and was buried. The Disciples had heard the stories of His resurrection. And having locked themselves away in a room for fear of the Jews, these followers of Jesus made sure nobody would be able to sneak in and catch them unawares. No doubt they were fearful of the Jews' reaction to the news of the resurrection, but they might also have been afraid of what Jesus Himself might say knowing how they had abandoned Him during the hours before His death.

Then, all of a sudden, there He was standing in their midst. He didn't appear to be a ghost. He didn't look as if as if He'd just spent three days in a tomb. But neither was He angry or distressed. They wondered what He was going say or do – how He would react. Yet, the first words out of His mouth were: "Peace be with you!" Then He showed them the wounds on His hands and in His side. This was no ghost or spirit. He was real, just like the peace He offered. His words weren't empty or meaningless, but bestowed the peace He had

purchased on Calvary's cross. And most amazingly, this peace was being given **to them** – the very ones who had betrayed Him only three days earlier!

Jesus came among them to strengthen and reinforce their faith. He appeared to them to assure them that in His flesh He had indeed risen from the dead. He was there to plant the seeds of ministry in them so that they could go and carry His peace and forgiveness to the world. He was there to send them on a mission – to go out into the farthest corners of the world to call sinners to believe in this One who had died on the cross of wood and risen from the dead for the salvation of all.

Next Jesus breathed on them the power of the Holy Spirit. There they were, downtrodden, dejected, not knowing what to do or how to do it. Then Jesus spoke. He gave them the strength to move forward with boldness. Through the proclamation of His Word, people's sins **would** be forgiven. All they had to do was proclaim this message. But Thomas wasn't with the others that night. We don't know why, but we do know that because He wasn't there he continued in his unbelief – not his doubt – and this even after all the others had told Him the Good News of Christ's resurrection. What was it that caused him not to believe? Was it that he had chosen to absent himself from the others? That explanation actually makes a lot of sense. For indeed, in our own day, that factor alone probably accounts for more Church drop-outs than anything else.

When a person removes himself from the life of the Church – whatever the reason – he's putting himself in spiritual danger. For no matter how insignificant the danger might seem, the reality is that it's very real. You are placing yourself in danger whenever you absent yourself from the hearing of the Word of God on a regular basis – and when you ignore the blessings of the Sacrament of the Altar – all of which are intended to strengthen you

in your walk with Christ and to build up your faith. There is real danger in not wanting to have God's forgiveness proclaimed to you. When you absent yourself from the life of the Church, you are the one who loses!

Consider Thomas. When he finally saw the Lord face to face, his attitude changed from unbelief to belief. He might not have realized that his faith was fading, but our Lord saw it. So He said to him: "Do not disbelieve any longer, but believe" And Thomas, when he saw and felt for himself the peace God had purchased for him in the wounds of His Savior, was convinced. Devastated by the knowledge of his unbelief, he cried out, "My Lord and my God!"

What an amazing God we have! Those who are bowed down are lifted up. Those who are despondent are given peace which passes understanding. Those who are crushed by their sins are made whole. Those who are blind to their lost condition are made to see it. Those who are sinful are made righteous. When God comes into a person's life He changes him from a sinner in danger of His wrath, into a beloved saint, an heir of everlasting life. He changes him from the status of enemy to the standing of a child!

Dear Christian, at one time God also came into your life. Just as He came to the disciples, He also came to you. When you least expected it, there He was in His Word, His Bath, His Supper, His Church, and in the mouth of His servant. He was there to show you those wounds which earned you His peace. When you wanted least of all to believe any of this could be true, He enabled you to confess Him as God and Lord. When you scarcely wanted to serve Him, He placed you willingly into His service. And He's still calling to you today – right now – calling you to hear His words of comfort and reconciliation – and to rejoice in the Gift of life He brings.

Though the words of this text were spoken specifically to the Apostles – and although the call He extended that night was directed more toward those who would be pastors in His Church rather

than to each of us individually – that doesn't mean there isn't something here in this text for you. You may not have been called to preach or administer the Sacraments, but are called to do what Christians throughout the ages have long been doing – telling others what God has done for you in the wounds of His Son. You are called to invite them to come, to see and hear what you've seen and heard – even as the other Apostles invited Thomas. You may not be trained as or qualified to be an evangelist – to be sure, the prospect of speaking to others about your faith might be rather frightening – but all God has ever asked is that you tell someone else what you already know to be true. After all, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this Book, but these things are written that" people "might believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing have life in His name."

It's a fearful task you face when you open your mouth to speak the Truth of God to someone who needs to hear it. Will they reject you for saying what you know you need to say? Will they laugh with scorn at your gullibility for believing something so amazing as this Gospel of Grace which saves us? Will they turn their back, thinking you a fool? It really doesn't matter, for in the Church we are all about God's work, and when God gives us something to do, He also gives us the wherewithal to do it. So do it we will – sometimes fearfully, sometimes joyfully, sometimes even unwillingly – but always with the knowledge that the Holy Spirit is at work in us, enabling us to do and say that which would otherwise be impossible. For although such things are impossible with us, with God nothing shall be impossible, and God will strengthen you in your task and on your journey for the sake of His Son who grants us all things. May it always be so for Jesus' 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.