

Sermon for Easter 2 - John 20:19-31

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We've got some explaining to do. After the events of last weekend, most especially our celebration of the resurrection of Christ from the dead, some questions will be asked of us. Not just questions about our Lord's resurrection, but about our own: How are the dead raised? What happens when we die? What kind of bodies will we have when we enter eternal life? And what it all boils down to is this: How can we be certain of the resurrection for us?

Fortunately enough, St. John gives answers to these questions (and more!) in his first letter: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is." And as St. Paul said, "If we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His." Nonetheless, "what we will be has not yet appeared." None of us has seen a resurrected person. We will not see this until our bodies in which we dwell are transformed. Or as St. Paul said, "The perishable must put on the imperishable and the mortal must put on immortality." There is only One who has done this. At only one moment in history thus far has this transformation of death to life been seen in reality, that is visibly or tangibly. This was the resurrection of Christ. During the forty days after Easter the disciples met Him again and again in His immortal and imperishable body.

It's unbelievable. Something that is everlasting and imperishable that happened hundreds of years ago. How different it is from the things we see today. Our rational minds tell us what's real and what's worth seeking after: Fame. Glory. Meaning in life. But who can blame us? Everything about this life looks as if it really does matter, as if our efforts on this planet should amount to something. Sure, life isn't perfect, but with a little elbow grease we can make it pretty close to perfect, no? For example, we all need to eat 3 meals a day, but who's going to argue if we can find ways to make them taste better? We all need to sleep at night, but who wouldn't want a softer bed, and a more stable lock for the door? What's wrong with trying to make the best we can out of this material world?

Nothing. There's nothing inherently evil about a little filet mignon, an iPad, or a new car off the lot. But, there is something terribly, horribly wrong with all of these things. Sooner or later they're all going to rust, rot, burn out, go out of style, and/or fall apart. Tables and chairs, pots and pans, shirts and shoes. Everything that is anything in this world is cursed. They're all in the same predicament: looking gorgeous and seeming like it might last forever, but never proving to be anything more than fading dust. This goes not only for all the "stuff" we spend our lives trying so hard to make and own and keep and fix. But it gets worse. Against all our hopes, against all our dreams, against all our ambitions, our bodies, like everything else of this world, will give out, will fail, and will die. A man doesn't need to wait for the Day of Judgment to learn the true value of mortality. There's 3 things you need to know about death in the world: 1. Humans don't live forever. 2. Death is God's own testimony to us that there is something desperately wrong in this world. 3. God sent Jesus to make it right.

In today's Gospel are the perfect words which show how Christ makes it right: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld' ... Eight days later, His disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them.

Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then He said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' Thomas answered Him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." St. Paul said it this way: "We walk by faith, not by sight." Our reasonable minds try to overrule this fact, as was the case with St. Thomas. With him we say, "What's really important is what I touch and see and above all, what I can feel. If I can feel something, then I can believe it."

The natural mind prefers sight over faith. But there's just one problem with that. The natural mind is the enemy of God, so the Bible says (1 Cor. 2:14ff). That's why reason and feelings can never be trusted. In matters of salvation, they lead astray every time. Reason tells us we're not so bad, especially when we compare ourselves with other people. Judging by sight, by outward appearances, we think sin is no real problem. Sure we sin, but so does everyone else. So what's the big deal about sin, as long as we can manage it? That's the way our natural mind figures.

Faith however, against our natural mind, believes the Word of God. And the Word of God says that sin is a big deal indeed. It's nothing less than idolatry and open rebellion against God. The wages of sin is death. Every white lie we speak, every lustful glance we take, every covetous desire we have and hold is honoring our reason and is honoring our feelings above the Word of God. Rather than putting ourselves at the top of our own homemade totem pole of morality, saying, "I thank you, God, that I'm not as bad as those people," let's say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Let's walk by faith, not by sight.

Reason tells us that when it comes to the forgiveness of sins, Baptism is just plain water – a mere symbol of my personal commitment to Jesus. God's Word tells us that in Baptism, "[The Lord] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness [especially our commitment to Him], but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Reason says that no one on earth can forgive sins before God in heaven. God's Word teaches us that Jesus has given His church the authority on earth to forgive sins. Jesus told His apostles, "He who listens to you listens to Me." Reason tells us that the Lord's Supper is mere bread and wine. God's Word teaches us that the bread we break is a participation in the body of Christ, and the cup we drink is a participation in His Holy Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

We walk by faith, not by sight. Even when we can sense that there is nothing in us but sin and death, God declares the opposite. "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The forgiveness of sins – our hope for the resurrection – rests entirely on the work of God's Son, Jesus Christ in the Word He proclaimed. It doesn't rest on our thoughts and it doesn't rest on our emotions. Because our resurrection, salvation, and forgiveness rest entirely on Jesus, it is absolutely certain. God has declared us to be holy. God has declared us to be perfect. God has declared us to be righteous because of Jesus. Who will make God a liar? Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠