

Sermon for Easter II – John 20:19-31

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

There they sat. Inside. For what seemed like an eternity. They were so afraid of what was “out there” that they wouldn’t dare go out, at least, not without using extreme caution. Every cough, every sneeze was looked at with fear of what might happen. How long would their supplies last? When would it be over? How could they pick up the pieces? How could they regain their livelihood? Would life ever be normal again?

It’s not hard for us to get the sense of what our Lord’s disciples were doing after His death. They were self-quarantined and staying home. What amounted to a couple days was the longest, most stressful time of their lives. They scattered after Christ’s arrest. One among their ranks, Judas the betrayer, died when he hung himself. The trial, the sentencing, the execution of their Lord made it unthinkable for them to be out and about—for what would happen to them? And then on that same day, Mary Magdalene and the other women, and the disciples on the road to Emmaus, all testified that Jesus was alive and no longer dead. Could it be true?

All the disciples were skeptical of Christ’s resurrection, but only one earned the title and reputation for it. They call him doubting Thomas. He didn’t believe the other disciples when they told him that they had seen their Lord. Thomas doubts because He is afraid. Jesus had told him what would happen: how the Son of Man would be killed and then rise on the third day. But when the third day came, Thomas wasn’t there. He was afraid of getting his hopes up. He didn’t want to be disappointed; he didn’t want to look like a fool.

Doubt is sin. It sets its own reason and experience above the Word of God. For Thomas, his reason and experience were crystal clear: dead men don’t rise. And every sin, at its core is doubt. Our Old Adam refuses to believe that God knows what is best for us, or believes that God is powerless to give us what is best for us, or that He doesn’t actually want to give us what is best, so we must take it for ourselves.

Doubt also rarely flies solo. For the sake of co-pilot greed, by my doubts I become discontent. I doubt God will provide for me in the way I think I deserve or in the way I think I need. For the sake of co-pilot vanity, by my doubts I feel dissatisfied with my life. I doubt the callings which God has given me and question whether He is all-wise and benevolent. My life is being wasted. Why should I settle, when I can be so much more?

The answer to doubt is both predictable and obvious, thankfully. In our Gospel, Christ showed Himself to unbelieving Thomas and he became a believer. Thomas is converted by Christ and able to confess Him as both God and Lord. Then our Lord said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Have believed what? Have believed what the apostles witnessed and said. And that’s the answer to doubt for us: our Lord sent out these apostles and those who would come after them so that we can believe that Christ died and is now alive again.

What was the first word that our risen Lord spoke when He appeared to His fearful disciples in that locked room? “Peace.” “Peace to you,” He said. This was not just some friendly greeting. It was God’s pronouncement. Peace is a present reality. It’s more than a wish or a hope for a better future. Jesus gave those fearful men the peace of God. He did it by speaking to them. He did it by breathing on them. He was not dead, for only men who are alive are able to breath. This is how the Father sent the Son to establish peace on earth.

Christ fought the battle to secure our peace, as He bore the sins of the world, confronting all the powers of darkness and doubt on the cross. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me," He cried out as a condemned criminal, so that He might cast all condemnation into the depths of the sea. "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

Christ's resurrection is God's absolution for the entire world of sinners. He died for us to take away our sins. He made peace between us and God. He rose from the dead. Though this is true, Thomas did not believe until he saw. Christ permitted him to see and to touch. And this is Good News for us: Thomas further validates the apostolic testimony with his own senses. The peace that Christ speaks is God's genuine peace. God is at peace with you. Look! See His wounds. See the scars on His hands and His side. Here is the evidence that He who died for your sins is alive. He speaks the word of peace and thereby gives it. He gives His Church the power to forgive and to retain sins.

But we don't see it. At least, not like the first disciples did. Jesus is not visible to our eyes and we don't see Him as Thomas and the other apostles did. But it must be enough for us to listen to those that Jesus sends to speak on His behalf. We call them ministers because they feed the Church with God's Good News and Sacraments.

God has given us a most blessed gift in the forgiveness of sins spoken to us. Why? Because as Christians we still fall into sins. We do things incompatible with our confession of who God has made us to be. We fall into patterns of behavior that trap us. By following our own selfish appetites, we become our own worst enemy. We bind ourselves in our sins by continually disobeying God's Law. We've enslaved ourselves. And deep down in our hearts, we know that we are offending God. We want to be reconciled to God, but we're afraid. We have our doubts. We remain paralyzed in our fear, trapped in our sins, and estranged from God. We practice social distancing from the only person we shouldn't: God.

Yet, Christ is filled with compassion for poor miserable sinners like us. Look at how gently He treated His disciples! They ran away from Him. They denied Him. They left Him to suffer alone. How does He respond? He greets them with words of peace and forgiveness. He does the same for us today.

And we still have the Holy Scriptures. Much like doubt is never alone, faith is never alone either. Our faith clings to Christ Jesus our Lord. St. John said that his Gospel was written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and through this faith have life in His name. Reading your Bible and hearing it read for you seems like a rather mundane activity. If we look at it as *our* activity, it might be nothing more than that. But through the Scriptures, Christ chooses to appear to us, not visibly as He did for the apostles. But here's the kicker: we, who do not see, are more blessed than they who did. God blesses us when we find Jesus in the speaking of mortal men and in the reading of an ancient book. The Risen Christ lives in His Living Word. Our senses and our doubts may deceive us. But God's Word never will. Amen.

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