

## “JESUS LIVES TO BRING PEACE”

John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter (Series A)

April 23, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Second Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*. It's chapter 20, verses 19 through 31, and you can find it on page 769 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus proves his resurrection to his doubting disciples. And the result is peace. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From John 20, we begin reading at verse 19.

<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” <sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

<sup>26</sup> 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.” <sup>27</sup> 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.” <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Jesus Christ lives. His dead body came back to life. Breath came back into his lungs. Blood came back into his veins. His heart started pumping it again. And his brain resumed sending and receiving impulses. Jesus rose from the dead.

Now how can this be? Dead people don't simply come back to life. We know that. We understand the science behind it. Cells need blood with oxygen and various nutrients. So the lungs need to put oxygen in the blood, and the digestive system needs to put nutrients in the blood, and the heart needs to pump that blood all around the body, especially to the brain. And

all these things work together. If the heart or the lungs or the brain stop working, it doesn't take long for all of them to stop working, and the person dies. Then, very soon, the individual cells in the body die, and they start decomposing, and there's no way to reverse it. We understand how this works. That's why we have such a hard time believing that anyone could come back from the dead.

So we think that, maybe, the people in the ancient world were just ... ignorant. Maybe they were naïve concerning death. They didn't understand how it works. And they were so superstitious they believed something that wasn't even real. Maybe they believed the resurrection of Jesus simply because they didn't understand the science of death.

And, of course, they didn't have the scientific advancements we have today. But on a real and practical level, they understood death far better than we do, for the simple reason that they dealt with it on a regular basis. They dealt with death much more intimately than we do. Unless you work in a medical or mortuary field, or something like that, we really don't deal with death very much. For most of us, when someone dies, we just make a phone call, and it's someone else's job to clean it up and sanitize that physical problem.

It used to be—and this is long before I was born—but it used to be that, when grandpa died, dad might come and say, “Son, today I'm going to teach you how to build a coffin. Then we're going to dig a grave.” Or a Jewish girl might learn from her family how to wrap a body in linen cloths with spices between the layers.

When Jesus died, it wasn't a funeral home that came and got the body. It was some of his friends and disciples who took care of it. It was Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and several of the women, like Mary Magdalene, another Mary, Joanna, and Salome, who either carried Jesus' body, wrapped it in linen cloths, or prepared spices for his burial (19:38-42; Luke 23:55-56).

That's just the way it was. When someone close to you died, it was your responsibility to make sure their body was handled with respect.

So even if their science was not as advanced as ours, their practical knowledge of death was far more extensive. They knew what death looked like, and they knew it didn't just undo itself. When you have to handle that room temperature corpse and smell the rotting flesh, if the reality of death hadn't sunk in yet, it does then. This person is dead. And death doesn't just undo itself.

The reality they saw with their eyes and felt with their hands and smelled with their noses was that this person is not coming back to life. Death does not just undo itself. People in the ancient world were not gullible. They had a much firmer grasp on reality than even the best of us.

That is why Jesus' disciples generally didn't believe it when someone told them he had risen. Jesus had even told them beforehand—several times—that he would be crucified and would rise from the dead on the third day (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19). This is the same Jesus whom they had seen walk on water, give sight to the blind, and even raise the dead, along with numerous other miracles. If anyone could raise himself from the dead, it was Jesus. But they didn't believe it simply by hearing.

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On that Easter morning, Jesus first appeared to the women (Matt. 28:9-10). So they saw and believed. Then they went to tell the apostles. “But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:11). Then, later that day, a large group of disciples—

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not just the apostles, but many of the other disciples as well (*cf.* Luke 24:33-43)—they were gathered together in one place. And Jesus appeared to them. So now they all saw and believed. But one of the apostles, Thomas, wasn’t there. And even though this large group of people had seen Jesus—even though all ten of the other apostles, as well as many other disciples—even though they all insisted that they had seen the risen Jesus, Thomas refused to believe. Why? Because he had a firm grip on reality. They all did. They would not believe until they saw it, because they had a firm grip on reality. They knew that dead people don’t just come back to life. But then they saw it, and they believed.

Thomas, however, would not believe their story. But then, eight days later, they were all gathered together again. And this time, Thomas was with them. And the same thing happens as the week before. “Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you’ ” (20:26).

Then Jesus has this special conversation with Thomas. He doesn’t rebuke Thomas for his unbelief. God doesn’t respond to unbelief by shaming us; he simply fixes the problem.

So Jesus shows Thomas his hands—those same hands where Thomas wanted to see and touch the mark of the nails. And Jesus shows him his side—that same side where Thomas wanted to see and touch the hole left by the spear. Jesus shows Thomas the wounds by which he accomplished Thomas’ salvation. And he invites Thomas to even touch the wounds. And we don’t really know whether or not Thomas took Jesus up on this offer. It kind of seems like he didn’t. He simply answered, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28).

So Thomas believed because he saw the risen Jesus. He was not superstitious. And he was certainly not gullible. He had a firm grip on reality. And that’s why he finally believed. And Jesus doesn’t rebuke Thomas for this, but he does say, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (20:29).

You and I don’t have the same privilege Thomas did. We don’t get to see it—at least, not yet. So it’s a good thing for us that “faith comes by hearing” (Rom. 10:17). Otherwise, we would never believe either. But the Holy Spirit graciously works through his Word to awaken faith. And that’s why these Scriptures are written for us—so that we might hear, believe, and live forever.

Right after the Thomas story, John writes,

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:30-31).

That’s the point of all this. That’s the reason these resurrection appearances are written down—so that we can know what the eyewitnesses saw. So for us, faith comes by hearing, but that doesn’t mean faith is blind. We don’t suspend reason. We don’t abandon everything we know about death. We believe Jesus rose from the dead, because we have good historical reasons to believe that it actually happened the way the eyewitnesses say it happened. That’s why the eyewitness reports are written down for us—so that we might believe through our ears what they say through their eyes.

Jesus lives. He really does.

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So what difference does this make? Pay attention to what Jesus says, over and over again in this gospel lesson. “Peace be with you” (20:19). “Peace be with you” (20:21). “Peace be with you” (20:26). Three times he says it—twice to the disciples on that first Sunday evening, and then again to Thomas on the next Sunday. Three times: “Peace be with you.” It doesn’t take a scholar to figure out, that’s the point of this gospel lesson. Jesus lives, and the result is peace, and not just any kind of peace, but peace with God—the greatest kind. Jesus has made full satisfaction for all our sins, including our doubts, so now we have peace with God.

We think about the eleven apostles. The last time any of them had spoken with Jesus, it didn’t go that well. They all promised to go with Jesus to the death, but none of them did. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, they all fled and abandoned him. Peter stuck around just long enough to deny Jesus three times, and then he left. John, at least, was there at the cross to watch Jesus die. But by that time it was too late. The last memory they had of Jesus was how they let him down. They all failed him. And perhaps you have felt as well, when your sins prick your conscience, that you have failed Jesus.

But then “Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you’ ” (20:19). He showed them his hands and his side—the wounds by which he earned the right to declare God’s peace to them. And then he says again, “Peace be with you.” It’s like he wants them to believe it ... because it’s true! His blood has made peace with God (Col. 1:20). And so Jesus declares this peace, not merely to the apostles, but to all his disciples.

Then he gives them a gift—the Holy Spirit. And he gives them a mission. This peace is not just for the apostles or the other disciples there. It is for the whole world. So Jesus says something quite radical: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (20:23).

And remember, it was not just the apostles there, but many other disciples. At that time, the Christian Church consisted of the people in that room. Jesus gave this authority to his Church. Let me state that again, and pay attention. *Jesus gave his Church authority to forgive sins, as well as withhold forgiveness.* And he wasn’t talking about man’s forgiveness. He wasn’t talking about when your neighbor sins against you. He was talking about when any sinner sins against God. Jesus was talking about *God’s* forgiveness. And he gave this authority to his Church.

I know this might be a hard concept to accept. But look at Jesus’ words. They are quite clear.

For me, this biblical teaching was the hardest part of Lutheran doctrine to accept. I would sit in church, and after the confession of sins, a Lutheran pastor might absolve us—that is, forgive our sins. He might even use the words, *I forgive you.* And I would get mad. Now, it’s kind of silly to be mad about having your sins forgiven, right? But I was mad—really, really mad—because I thought this guy was committing blasphemy. I mean, no one can forgive sins but God alone, right? Well, almost—God and whoever he decides to share that authority with. And Jesus’ words are so very clear. He shares that authority with his Church.

He does this because he wants those sins to be forgiven, and he does not want us to doubt it ... ever! “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.” Jesus’ words mean what they say. When you confess your sins, and a pastor stands in front of you and forgives you, it’s not because he has any special power. He does it, simply because Jesus commanded him to. He’s a fellow sinner.

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When we confess our sins, the pastor faces the altar, just like the rest of you, because he has to confess his sins too. And then he turns and declares the forgiveness that Jesus has commanded him to give.

And the reason the pastor does this, and not someone else, is simply for the sake of good order. His education or ordination or whatever doesn't give him any special power. A congregation simply designates a man to serve them. And this is one of the pastor's appointed duties as a *servant*.

So the *Small Catechism* rightly teaches—and I make our confirmands memorize this: “Confession consists of two parts: the one is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the pastor as from God Himself, in no way doubting, but firmly believing that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.”

This has nothing to do with the power of the pastor, but everything to do with the promise of God. If you feel the need to confess your sins, and you don't have a pastor handy, you can use any other Christian.

And it is such a comforting thing that Jesus gives this authority to his Church. I wish that all Christian denominations understood this. But, sadly, most of them don't. Most think of forgiveness as something that happens privately, just between me and God, without anybody or anything else being involved—things a pastor, or water, or bread and wine, or even the Word of God.

But if forgiveness is something that happens privately between me and God, then the “monster of uncertainty” always creeps in—especially when our “sticky” sins don't go away. *How do I know I prayed the right words when I asked God to forgive me? How do I know I was really sincere? How do I know I really have faith, especially when I have all these doubts? Sometimes I feel forgiven, but sometimes I don't. Does that mean I'm only sometimes a Christian?* These are the questions we inevitably have when the “monster of uncertainty” is allowed to exist. And the “monster of uncertainty” is really just another name for the devil, whose favorite question is, “Did God really say ...?”

*Did God really say your sins are forgiven?* Yes he did! So do not ever doubt it.

God's forgiveness always comes from outside of us. And the reason is for our comfort. The Word of God—where God reveals his loving actions toward you. Water—because God says Baptism forgives sins (*Acts 2:38*). Bread and wine—because Jesus says it forgives sins (*Matt. 26:28*). The absolution—because Jesus told his Church to forgive sins. God works through these external means because they slay the “monster of uncertainty.”

So when I, or some other pastor, or any other Christian for that matter, tells you that your sins are forgiven, believe it, because it's true!

And how do you know it's true? Is it because you really, really feel it this time? No; that has nothing to do with it. It is because Jesus lives. He shows off the wounds by which he earned the right to declare peace with God. And he gave his Church the authority to declare this peace on his behalf.

This is all because of Jesus—his work and his promise.

So as a servant of this congregation, and as a servant of Jesus Christ, I speak on his authority. *I forgive you all your sins* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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And now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.