

## Sermon for Easter 2

The Text: John 20:19-31

Overcoming all obstacles! That could be the title for our message today. Last week, Easter Sunday, we hear that Jesus has overcome death itself. That is the report of the angels to the women as they see the empty tomb. He is risen! In today's gospel reading, situated on that very evening, we again hear that Jesus overcomes all obstacles. The disciples have gathered together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews—those who had Jesus murdered and threatened to expel from the synagogue all who confessed Him as Messiah. Jesus is bodily present among them. In His risen and glorified state, death, the rock of the tomb, the walls and the locked doors of the house do not restrict Jesus. He comes to be present with His disciples.

And it is with His presence among His disciples that we see Jesus overcoming another obstacle. It's the human condition of brokenness and sin. Up until this point, Jesus' disciples have shown themselves to be seriously falling short in their life of faith. In Matthew's Gospel, Simon Peter pulls Jesus aside and gives Him a good old-fashioned dressing down after Jesus foretells His own suffering and death. In Luke, just after Jesus institutes His meal of Holy Communion, the disciples squabble amongst themselves about who is the greatest, in Mark and Matthew they fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane instead of keeping watch and praying with Jesus, and Peter even *denies* Jesus, not just once but *three times*. And on the morning of Jesus' resurrection, their initial reaction to news of the empty tomb was that the women's words seemed as foolishness. Later in our very text, we hear Thomas' refusal to believe that the risen Lord had been present with the other disciples.

So when the risen Lord appears to the disciples inside the locked room, they have every reason to expect reprimand and rebuke from Jesus for their lack of faith, for their failure to do what He has asked of them, and for their acts of self-centredness.

But before we point the finger at the disciples, let us not think of ourselves as any better. How many times have we failed in matters of faith and devotion? So the rebuke that we expect for the disciples we should also expect for ourselves.

In our text, Jesus overcomes all obstacles. The Lord of Life who overcame the tomb overcomes the locked door of the disciples' house. He overcomes their sin so that God is in their presence to bring peace rather than judgment.

Jesus does that with His proclamation to the disciples: "Peace to you." After He said this, Jesus shows His disciples the marks in His hands where the nails had been driven through to the Cross and the side of His body, pierced with the spear. Then Jesus says to them again: 'Peace to you. Jesus' greeting 'Peace to you' brackets the showing of His hands and side. Jesus pronounces peace to His disciples and then shows them the costly price at which He bought their peace—His hands and side, pierced by the nails and the spear. In this way, John shows that Jesus' words are an absolution—the pronouncement of forgiveness of sins from Christ Himself.

Then Jesus overcomes another obstacle—the absence of Thomas. Jesus doesn't let Thomas exclude himself from Jesus' blessing. He comes again, and rather than chastise him, repeats His greeting of peace for the benefit of Thomas. And Jesus' threefold invitation in v27 corresponds exactly to Thomas' own threefold statement of unbelief earlier in v25. Jesus says to Thomas: 'Put your finger here and see my hands and put your hand into my side. Don't be unbelieving, but believe.

Jesus' proclamation by word and wounds that the disciples are recipients of God's forgiveness and peace is His same proclamation to us. He has forgiven us all of our sins. The original Greek word for forgiveness actually means a releasing, a dismissal, a sending away from. That's what Jesus' proclamation of peace—forgiveness of sins—means for us. His proclamation of forgiveness of sins are words that actually *do* something. They give to us a new identity; a new standing before God, because we are released from our sins which are taken away from us as if they were never committed. So rather than trembling before God's holy

presence deserving of His anger and judgment, we are able to stand before our Heavenly Father as His freed child with a clear conscience. Our sins have been removed from you as far as the east is from the west, we hear in Psalm 103, or more concretely, as far as we are from the Cross, some 2000 years ago.

Our sins are taken away and put on the Cross of Christ. And we know that through the Cross of Christ, we receive all the blessings that forgiveness of sins means: a new standing before God, the peace of God, eternal life, salvation, victory over sin, death and the devil! Now how does that actually work? How are our sins laid on the Cross, and how do we actually, concretely, physically receive for ourselves everything that Jesus won for us on the Cross?

When Luther was invited to preach at the baptism of Prince Bernhard, the three week old son of Prince John of Anhalt on Maundy Thursday, 1540, and then on Easter Sunday, he preached on this very same Gospel reading from John. And in his sermon, Luther beautifully linked the message of Easter, the forgiveness of sins, and importantly, the theology of baptism. Luther said this:

*“... we began to speak about the baptism of Christ and said that he accepted it from John for the reason that he was entering into our stead...that is, becoming a sinner for us, taking upon himself the sins which he had not committed, and wiping them out and drowning them in his holy baptism. And that he did this in accord with the will of God, the heavenly Father, who cast all our sins upon him that he might bear them and not only cleanse us from them through his baptism and make satisfaction for them on the Cross, but also clothe as in his holiness and adorn us with his innocence.*

*Is not this a beautiful, glorious exchange, by which Christ, who is completely innocent and holy, not only takes upon himself another's sin, that is, my sin and guilt, but also clothes and adorns me, who am nothing but sin, with his own innocence and purity? And then besides dies the shameful death of the Cross for the sake of my sins, through which I have deserved death and condemnation, and grants to me his righteousness, in order that I may live with him eternally in glorious and unspeakable joy.*

*Through this blessed exchange, in which Christ changes places with us...and through nothing else, we are freed from sin and death and given his righteousness and life as our own...*

*[we can therefore] say: I know of no more sins, for they are all lying on Christ's back...he takes them and drowns and smothers them in baptism and the Cross..."*

What Luther described as the blessed exchange, is true for us, through baptism. In our baptism, Christ took our sin upon Himself and gave us His righteousness. This becomes a living reality every time in worship when as sinners we exchange the peace of the Lord with each other. It's what happens every time in the Holy Communion liturgy when the pastor says: "The peace of the Lord be with you always" and the congregation responds with the 'Amen', in other words: Yes I believe this to be true, it is certainly so; I come as a sinner yet am receiving peace from Christ Himself so that I can come to Holy Communion in His presence and receive His favour with a clear conscience.

As Jesus strengthens us by his body and blood to live as true members of his body, the church—people who are in a new and right standing before God—we also have the privilege of announcing God's grace to our neighbour. When our spouse comes to us after an argument asking forgiveness, when our brother or sister in the faith is moved to confess their wrongs to us, when our kids say sorry for something they've done to upset us, or kids, when your parents come to you and say, I'm sorry, I came down on you too hard and I should have listened, hear Jesus' words from our reading today: "Peace to you." As God's holy priesthood you also have the privilege of announcing such grace and peace to them. Announcing God's forgiveness and peace to your brothers and sisters in Christ is the greatest service we can render to them: "God forgives us for Jesus' sake. Jesus died and rose again to give us His peace."

Always be ready to announce God's forgiveness of sins and his peace, for it is the same message of forgiveness of sins and peace that He proclaims to us. Amen.