

Sermon for Easter 2, 7th April Lay Reading

The Text: John 20:19-31

The sun has set on that first Easter day. In the midst of their grief and confusion, the apostles are given a glimmer of relief through sightings of the risen Lord Jesus, through angelic messengers who bring hope for the future, and a dim, dark memory of some things Jesus said about suffering and dying and rising again. But as the sun sets, fear and anxiety takes hold once more. Life often seems more difficult when darkness descends.

The apostles find a safe location and lock themselves in securely. Who knows what they talked about? What we do know is that despite all the evidence that Jesus had overcome death, they were still scared out of their wits, fearful that the Jewish leaders would murder them just as they had murdered Jesus.

Jesus had the right to show up and tell the disciples off. “You thick-headed people,” he could have said, “I told you over and over and over again that I was going to rise on the third day. How come you never got it?” Jesus had the right to do that, but He didn’t. Instead *Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”* Instead of scolding them, He gave them peace.

They deserved wrath, but Jesus gave them peace.

Standing in the middle of the disciples and proclaims that, despite their failures; despite the way they abandoned Jesus and even denied Him, they have peace with God. And as He says this, Jesus shows them how much this peace cost – pointing to the wounds of His crucifixion.

So Jesus speaks His word of peace and the disciples receive the gift of reconciliation with God. It’s little wonder that they were still so excited when Thomas finally arrives later that night. “We have seen the Lord!” they declare to him, expecting Thomas to be excited. Over the centuries Thomas’ response has come to be known as one of doubt...but that’s not accurate. Thomas doesn’t doubt, he flat out refuses to believe. That’s what he says. It’s not that Thomas has a few questions about what happened to Jesus – he simply refuses to believe the word of God spoken to him by Jesus’ apostles. He rejects the eyewitness testimony of those who had seen Jesus and been given authority to tell the world about Him.

Well, a week later, it's the same story. The disciples are gathered in the same room but this time Thomas is there. And Jesus shows up again. And again He has every right to tell Thomas off for his unbelief. But the first word Jesus speaks is one of peace. He declares that our sin's rage against God is finished and He gives hope for eternity. He doesn't chastise Thomas but offers the proof Thomas asked for and then demands that Thomas stop doubting and believe. He tells Thomas to stop being a pagan. Stop being an unbeliever doomed for judgement. And He calls him to simply believe. And what's amazing is that Jesus' words are enough. Thomas doesn't stick his fingers in the nail wounds and he doesn't prod Jesus' side. Instead he hears Jesus' words and his heart is changed. He cries out, "My Lord and my God!"

People often say how much easier it would be to believe if only...if only they could see Jesus....if only they could have some miraculous experience....if only Christian teaching was more in line with their way of thinking...if only their lives showed more evidence of blessing...and the list goes on. But what today's reading does is show this kind of thinking for what it is: unbelief. This unbelief has the worst consequences, for refusal to believe God's promises leads to hell.

Jesus doesn't mess around with Thomas. Jesus speaks plainly that Thomas needs to stop being an unbeliever if he wants to enjoy the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection. Simply hanging around with the other apostles while maintaining this stubborn unbelief is not enough.

Yet Jesus is determined that Thomas not continue in unbelief. Jesus is kind and gracious and speaks words of forgiveness and mercy to him, and this word of grace changes the hardest of hearts.

That's good news for us, too. For as we can no longer see Jesus with our eyes, it can be easy to doubt—or even disbelieve—God's promises in Christ to us. How do we deal with unbelief such as this that lurks in all our hearts? How do we simply trust in the Lord whose wounds declare us forgiven and at peace with God?

At the end of our reading John says "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

What a wonderful statement of grace to you and me! Through His servant John, the Lord is telling us that we have all we need to believe and be saved. It's not the kind of proof that will satisfy those looking for spectacular experiences or

worldly approval...but it is the sure and certain proof that we all need to be freed from our sins and to live in the knowledge that we are at peace with God because Jesus died in our place and is now risen.

The Word of God is all we need. In fact Paul says in the letter to the Romans that faith can only come through hearing the word of Christ. That's what John is saying. Yes, those first apostles were blessed to see the Lord, resurrected from the dead, alive and full of blessing. But ultimately their faith was based on the words He spoke...the same word we have with us still today.

Week after week many of us come here and basically our message is the same. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins. He rose again in victory over sin and death and the Devil. And now He proclaims we are forgiven and set free for eternity. And you know that's basically what the apostles said to Thomas as well when he refused to believe. Let us be careful, that we too are not stubborn and unbelieving and buy into Satan's lie that we need more than this; the lie that there is something more exciting, something more spiritual than hearing that our sins are forgiven? God forbid that we would be found to be unbelieving Thomases in this way.

For just as Jesus was present with the disciples proclaiming peace and forgiveness in the midst of their fears, He surely stands with us today speaking that same word. He proclaims we are forgiven by His blood. He declares heaven is ours because He overcame death and the grave and was raised on the third day. He continues to come to us proclaiming peace, proclaiming life, proclaiming salvation that at the last day we would be found believing.

So hear the word of Christ spoken first to the apostles, then to Thomas and now to us here. The word that sets us free and creates faith in Jesus' saving work. The word that Jesus has commanded His church to proclaim until He returns – the word that declares our sins are forgiven because Jesus has died our death and is now risen from the dead to fill us with the peace of God which passes all understanding. A peace that will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.