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Easter 2 One Year Series 2017

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Second Sunday of Easter (Quasimodo geniti)

1 Year Series

Last week the Church was full, where did they all go? If your experience is like my days in the parish, the second Sunday of Easter along with the Sundays following Christmas could see a significant drop off in attendance. Don't take that as any reflection on your Easter sermon. It is reflection on much that is wrong with us, but not some defect in the Word of God.

Today the readings have wonderful news for the faithful who manage to find their way to Church. They are there because they believe – Jesus notices them and blesses them. God is very glad to see the folks who come out this day. This is not a day to grump about those who are not here, but to be amazed that God has brought any of them at all! This is a day to concentrate on the miracle of faith which God works in his people and the many little and large miracles that come with it.

I actually looked forward to those diminished crowds after the big festivals. All the occasional attenders had been there the week before and would not show up again for a few weeks. This let me get deep into a few things with the faithful core who were ready to chew on a few more substantive issues.

This day focuses us on some faith issues. The chief concern when discussing faith is to remember that faith is a gift from God. Our contemporary culture sees it as a virtue and an act of the will, but Scripture consistently sees it as a gift from God, a relationship which He has established and which we can enjoy. Lately I have been reflecting on the ninth chapter of John in which John likens faith to sight. In that account the blind man is given his sight. Like faith, his sight was a gift from God. And yet, he also saw, in the same way we believe. We could also turn to family for a similar metaphor. Like an adopted child – the very metaphor which Peter will use today – we have been taken into God's arms and he has bestowed upon us name and place, love and someone to love. That relationship is the faith. Indeed, the little child who is adopted will come to love and trust in the parent, but that love and trust are located inside that relationship. The child did not create the relationship, decide to welcome the parent into his or her heart, etc. God has done that.

Today we are noticing that the folks who come out for Church are there because they believe (faith.) That is not to say that the folks last week were not there for the same reason, but for the ones who have managed to show up on this day, this is what we notice and God notices and He delights in it, and so should we if we are in tune with Him.

What is the difference between faith and belief? Is there one? Is there one in the way you talk about it? It is important to note that Greek has a noun and a verb form of the word "faith." English only has the noun but no verb. There is no English word like "faithing" we are saddled with only one verbal form "believing" which is really just the verbal form of belief. We don't have a word for the verb of "faith." Is that important? Have we, because of this issue in our language, confused the two? I think so. I think too many of our folks see faith as a weak form of knowledge. Do this little test: If I know someone will be at church or if I believe someone will be at church, which of those two statements suggests I am more certain? Most folks will suggest

that knowledge is more certain than believing. That is just the way English works right now. Be aware that the ancients who wrote your Bible and centuries of its interpreters have normally reversed that, suggesting that our senses and knowledge deceive us, but faith is more certain and differently certain. It is much more like that little child resting in her father's arms than it is book knowledge and facts about Jesus and the Bible.

God sees the faith which he has created in his people and he delights in it. It may not look like much to us, in fact, we can sometimes hardly see it, but God has much more penetrating vision than we do and he loves that relationship which he has established in Christ and when it shows up, he blesses. It is a good day to be a preacher.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, grant that we who have celebrated the Lord's resurrection may by Your grace confess in our life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God; through the same Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The prayer is simple and straight to the point. We who have celebrated the resurrection (that would be last week) now also want to put that faith into practice in word and deed. That also will take God's help. The prayer is obviously taking off on Thomas' words in the Gospel. We are really praying that God would overcome our Thomas-like unbelief and doubt so that we too may say and do the same things that he said and did.

How does one confess with life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God? Does Lord Jesus offer us any commands which we obey and thus mark his lordship? What are they? What does Jesus tell us to do that we actually do? While we can all imagine perhaps the act of a verbal confession, even imagine a life that confesses Christ, do we actually do it? Are we so sure that that we recognize just how one actually confesses that Jesus is God with our words and deeds? Perhaps another way to ask it would be to query our neighbors and acquaintances. Do they see Christ in us? That is a rather frightening thought. Our culture says faith should be private. Should it?

Luther defined your God as the one who solves your most important problems. What problems has Jesus solved for you? Confessing Christ might be as simple as saying Jesus solved this problem for me instead of saying, "I was sure lucky."

Is confessing Christ might as basic as attending Church? This would be a good day to confirm someone. For an 8th grader what do we say to them? Does Thomas speak to them today? They will return to school tomorrow and everything will be the same, but will they be different? Their faith will be under assault occasionally. Pressure will be applied to hide their faith, cool folks don't talk about God with any piety, reverence, or genuine affection. What basic posture do we want to inculcate in our young people. Do we need to send these young people into the world with optimism and confidence instead of a sense of fear about the "big, bad cultural wolf" who is lurking at the door? Do we shut ourselves out of the culture or do we understand ourselves to be agents of God's great changes he has in mind for this world.

This might be a way to build on the "do not be afraid" message from last week.

Do we assert the lordship of Christ in our life and word when we forgive the sinner? Jesus today will breathe on those disciples and empower their forgiveness. Do we solve our interpersonal problems differently because we are Christians? Do we forgive authoritatively?

This is difficult on several fronts. The culture is not really anti-God, but at times it seems to be anti-religion/Church. I find that my students are very interested in God, but they are very offended by and frustrated with religion and the Church. This has been particularly true this year at our campus. Heavy handed synodical politics and statements about homosexuality have at times created a situation in which the church has been cast as simply the people who hate homosexuals and want them to go away.

We also might wonder just how much “Therapeutic, Moralizing Deism” has infected our members. This is the religion which essentially asserts that God is far away, up in heaven (deism). He is perhaps interested in my life, but while he may watch it on some giant video screen, he is not really involved in my life’s day to day events. He wants me to be nice (moralizing) but mostly he wants me to be healthy (therapeutic.) This means that if I can rationalize my sin as a form of healthy behavior, it pretty well excuses it. I don’t look for God to do anything in my life, and if I am basically a pretty nice person, I will be OK at the judgment. For now, I just should not repress my real feelings, I should express myself, etc.

Is our discussion of faith with the unbelieving folks around us were off base? We tend to start our conversations with unbelievers in the second article of the creed, but we really need, in this time and place, to start conversations in the first article, in the reality of a God. Here the very Lutheran doctrine of Vocation and the sacredness of creation can really help us. God loves the world.

Readings

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³ And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” ⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these

slain, that they may live.”¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹ Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’”¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel.¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.¹⁴ And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”

Many of us probably have the old spiritual ringing in our ears after reading this.

There are several themes which present themselves in this text. Ezekiel has spent the first part of his ministry destroying the misplaced hope of the exiled people of Israel. You may remember that Nebuchadnezzar had exiled them in stages. Ezekiel was part of the first stage, the upper crust of the society, the people that Nebuchadnezzar thought most likely to lead another revolt. He brought them to Babylon as sort of a hostage group, in an effort to secure the good behavior of the folks whom he left behind to till the fields and pay the taxes, especially pay the taxes.

Ezekiel, of the high priestly family, was one of that first group to be displaced. His first prophetic call about five years after he arrived in Babylon was to smash the hopes that the first exiles had of going home. He had to tell them that all was lost; the city would soon be utterly destroyed. He hated his job much like Jeremiah hated his job. He had to tell the Jewish people that God’s wrath was coming and it was deserved. His brutal imagery in chapter 16 convicts even today.

Once that final destruction of Jerusalem happened, however, Ezekiel became a prophet of hope. In chapter 34 he proclaims that God himself will shepherd his people – Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy even today. In the final chapters of his book, he would go into exquisite detail about the floor plan, furnishings, and design of the new temple, anticipating its restoration. Remember he is speaking to the horrified exiles who watched the old one burn. Here in chapter 37, he is tackling the disappointment and disillusionment of the people head on. They feel like dried up bones, people abandoned by God. The hope they had of returning to their homes was shattered by Nebuchadnezzar’s army. But Ezekiel calls them to a new hope, a hope in God. The covenant had not been broken; indeed, the old covenant was still in force. The exile was simply the covenant in action. God would restore the fortunes of his people, no matter how difficult that looked.

As we look around the world right now it appears that the hopes many had for a new millennium a few years ago, a new sort of presidency, a new beginning in the Arab world, the hope of a new world order after the fall of the Soviet Union, etc., have all been dashed. The same old corrupt and dying world confronts us which we knew before. We were tired of it then, we are tired of it now. Ezekiel points us to another object for our hope.

Ezekiel is noted for his vivid imagery and baroque sign acts. This little piece is part of that well-deserved reputation. The sound of the bones rattling as they came together always has almost given me the creeps. I can imagine that sound.

Ezekiel seems to be saying a couple of things here that a preacher could hang onto for a sermon, or at least for an illustration in a sermon on the John text:

- 1. The power of the word – Ezekiel prophecies to the bones and the wind, and they hear his call and obey him. The word of the prophet is potent because it is also the word of the creator and lord of the universe. Could we proclaim that our folks are also prophets of a sort? Don't they bear witness to the good word of God? Don't they go out with a message that is empowered by the Holy Spirit to give life to the people who hear them?*
- 2. Death itself is undone here. The bones are very dry, this is no resuscitation, but a re-creation of the very flesh and sinews and skin which are necessary for human life. These guys have been dead a long time.*
- 3. The Spirit is an interesting play here, because the Greek and Hebrew words for Spirit can also be the words for breath and wind. (We ran into this in John 3 when Jesus compared the Spirit of God to the wind which blew in the trees.) Ezekiel prophecies to the breath (ruah) and it comes from the four winds (ruah) and the spirit (ruah) of life enters into them.*
- 4. Notice as well the description of the people. They are without hope, but Ezekiel calls them to hope not in the sort of things which might normally give hope, but in the promise and the gift of God. This is critically important here. God can undo even the biggest problem of all. God is not a consultant or life coach who will come and rearrange your life and help you cope with your sins. He comes to raise the dead.*

Ezekiel's words must have been remembered on the day that Cyrus ascended to the throne of the Persian Empire and one of his first decrees was that the exiled people could go home. This happened within the lifetime of some of the folks who heard Ezekiel preach, but when Ezekiel said these things, no one could have imagined that their oppressors would have said "Go home." What is more the very oppressors who had taken them from their homeland and destroyed their temple now were helping to fund the reconstruction effort! Who would have thought it could have happened?

What is also interesting is the extent to which the Jewish nation in exile did not hope for this. The majority of Jews did not take the Persians up on the offer. Most of them stayed in Babylon where a thriving Jewish community was maintained right up into the modern era. The Talmud will be written in Babylon and much of what shapes modern Judaism will come from that part of the world.

Are we hoping for what God has promised? Will any of us be disappointed if the Savior shows up and says forget about the plans you had this weekend, He has heaven for you? It seems hard to

imagine, but within about 50 years of Ezekiel speaking these words the Jews of Babylon will think that this land of exile is better than the promised land of Canaan. To what extent did Ezekiel's prophetic message fall on deaf ears? Someone listened and valued it; his book was retained in the OT. But was that a small remnant?

To what do our folks point when they imagine that they are hopeless, cut off from God? Who needs to hear the modern day Ezekiel and his prophecy of life? We earlier pointed to the political and worldly hopes which have been dashed for many. But I would guess that most of our folks are not motivated that way so much. We drew up this list some years ago. Does it need to be expanded?

- 1. Economic – Everything seems so volatile. The current vibe is of tumult and the feeling seems to be that we are on the edge of a disaster.*
- 2. Folks whose families are falling apart? When your marriage is ending, it can feel like the whole world is pretty pointless.*
- 3. The addict who has fallen once more back into the cesspool of his/her addiction, who feels like this is just too much for him/her. There is no hope of ever living free of this scourge.*
- 4. What about the person married to or who simply loves the addict and is watching their dear one descend once more into alcohol or drugs and cannot do anything about it?*
- 5. Perhaps they are an immigrant or a refugee. They may not be only afraid of immigration and officials who might deport them. My daughter attends a local school with many immigrants, most legal, some not. They are not so much afraid of the president as they are afraid of the majority of voters who elected the current president. They have a limited ability to see that those who voted may not share the feelings expressed in all the rhetoric, some of it quite anti-immigrant.*
- 6. The victim of abuse – a husband or a father or someone who has trapped me or someone I love in a relationship which is defined by nothing healthy.*
- 7. What about the man or woman who works so hard but cannot get a job which makes enough to support a family or can only find a job which is dangerous or demeaning.*
- 8. What about people in a conflicted congregation? Do they feel like there is no hope for their congregation? Do they check out of worship because they have lost hope in this place? Their bones are dry, mummified by a history of hurt and conflict unresolved. They cannot see a reason to back to church – they have lost all hope. They leave behind their friends, community, worshipping community and so much more. Perhaps we need to make “Ezekiels” out of the folks who are in church so they can reach to the “de-churched” folks who have checked out. They may be more effective than the professional – especially if the past conflict centered around the professional.*

9. *Perhaps we speak to a parish who has had a leader or member who tragically despaired and suicided. Or somehow that parish has watched them go through a moral failing, the leader's marriage falls apart, etc. Especially bad if it was a pastor.*

Sermon Ideas

1. Prophecy to the Dry Bones (Preaching to the Boneyard) (That the Holy Spirit would embolden and empower the hearer to speak His Word to their neighbors, family, friends, and others.)

Ezekiel seemed to be given an impossible task – his audience were bones, dead dry bones. Talking to them did not seem like it would work. But when God sends us out with a job to do, a Word to speak, it is with his power and Spirit that we speak.

Our neighbors may not seem like they are receptive to our word, they may seem like difficult “nuts to crack.” But it is not our word which we speak, it is Christ’s word which we speak, empowered by His Holy Spirit. That makes that Word effective. The disciples encountered a friend, a disbelieving, doubting friend. They did not convince him to believe – Jesus did. But they sought him out, told him, urged him to come. And he was there with them the next week in the upper room. Jesus changed his mind, they did not, but if he had not been in that upper room, how would have that happened? I am sure Jesus would have figured something out, but this is the story we have.

We can go out of these doors with courage and boldness. We can go out with great hope. God is afoot, he is at work in the words which we speak just as he was for Ezekiel and the discouraged and disheartened people of his day. God touches their hearts in our words. Just as the disciples unlocked the doors and went out of that upper room to seek out their friend, we can go out with confidence.

The preacher will need to motivate with the Gospel. Many of us are preaching to legacy congregations, parishes which have a great history but which are now in decline and facing financial realities. Will they be here in a few years? This congregation needs to hear this word spoken powerfully to them. They themselves feel like dry bones, wasting away while the world passes them by. They feel, perhaps not like they are dead yet, but they can see the undertaker digging the hole out there for them.

The person sent out into the community from such a parish will need him/herself to know that God even raises old bones like mine, makes me viable, even when I cannot see it or reason does not suggest that this can work.

2. The Christian Hope (That the Holy Spirit would engender a living and vibrant hope in the hearer.)

This sermon is for the discouraged. The Israelites were discouraged because their nation was in ruins. Perhaps our kingdom, our congregation, is in ruins or certainly a hollow shell of its once greater glory. I used to serve Roseburg, Oregon which is the center of Douglas County. At one point, 1968, the county boasted the highest per capita income in the state. Once the timber economy collapsed in the 1980’s because of the spotted owl

controversy, the economic state of the county collapsed as well. When I arrived in 2000 it had the lowest per capita income of the state. Our town and every other little town in the area seemed like it was simply a string of shuttered businesses, run down homes, and abandoned dreams. That was not actually true, there were signs of life and growth, but for someone who had remembered the good times, it really felt like that.

This sermon wants to replace the discouragement with hope. That will take time and the Spirit. Ezekiel used the powerful image of resurrection here and it might be what you want to use too, but it is not just a resurrection of the body but of much more. For the Israelites it was the resurrection of their nation and their community. It really did happen. The Jewish culture today is one of the oldest contiguous cultures in the world. They have lived most of that without their homeland, preserving themselves as a pilgrim people, exiled from their homeland. It is a noble story, unfortunately sullied by some of their recent abuses of the Palestinians.

I am imagining a preacher in a building which was designed to seat hundreds but who is gathering with dozens on a Sunday morning. The budget is extremely tight, the future of the parish looks as grim as the heads are grey. He would preach hope. But this needs to be preached in a way which honors and listens to the text.

- a. The hope belongs to God – not to me. I don't get to define the hope, I just get to have it. God's answer for the Jewish folks a long time ago was not that the kingdom of David would be restored as they envisioned it. They spent many long years as a backwater outpost of the Persian, then the Greek, and then Roman Empires. When the new David came, he was so outside their expectations, they almost did not recognize him, at least many did not.
- b. Hope can fail and turn to discouragement. The people of God are accusing him of not loving them. They have despaired of the love of God. We can do that too if we focus only on our problems and thereby drown out his promises.
- c. The word and the kingdom of His Church belong to God as well. He loves the good work of the Church and he will see that it happens. The good work which this congregation has done lies in his hands and he will bring it to fruit to harvest. His plans for the future might not include this institution, but it will include his kingdom.
- d. That said, God also works resurrection – but often it comes from surprising quarters. The Jews returned when their captors decided one day to let them go home. They were looking for a new Moses like figure, someone who would smite the Babylonians with plagues, but they got Nehemiah and Ezra, folks who worked inside the Persian empire, folks who led them very differently from Moses. When Haman wanted to kill them, like Pharaoh had tried to kill them centuries before, God did not raise up a new Moses, but gave them Esther, a young woman who

saved them from destruction by throwing dinner parties. Hope means we have our hearts opened to the wonderful and new ways that God will accomplish this.

- e. God never forgets his promises – he had told David that his son would always rule, he had told the people of God that he would bring them home, he had told them that if they worshipped other Gods he would send them away to chastise them. He had promised them prophets and leaders like Ezekiel.

Psalm 33

- ¹ Shout for joy in the LORD, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright.
- ² Give thanks to the LORD with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!
- ³ Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
- ⁴ For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
- ⁵ He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.
- ⁶ By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
- ⁷ He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses.
- ⁸ Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
- ⁹ For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.
- ¹⁰ The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
- ¹¹ The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.
- ¹² Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!
- ¹³ The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all the children of man;
- ¹⁴ from where he sits enthroned he looks out
on all the inhabitants of the earth,
- ¹⁵ he who fashions the hearts of them all

and observes all their deeds.

¹⁶ The king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

¹⁷ The war horse is a false hope for salvation,
and by its great might it cannot rescue.

¹⁸ Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,

¹⁹ that he may deliver their soul from death
and keep them alive in famine.

²⁰ Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and our shield.

²¹ For our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.

²² Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

I John 5:4-10

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. ⁴ For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

⁶ This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. ⁷ For there are three that testify: ⁸ the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. ⁹ If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. ¹⁰ Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. ¹¹ And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

(John's first epistle is treated in the Sundays after Easter in Series B. This section of John's letter falls on Easter 6. Here are the notes, edited, from when we last treated this. I make some references which assume that the reader has been reading John's letter for the prior weeks. If you have not committed it to memory, you may need to go back and brush up.)

Do you find that your head spins after reading too much John? Mine does. Everyone who believes has been born of God. OK, that makes sense. And everyone who loves the Father loves whatever has been born of him. So, how do you love what has been born of the Father, that is everyone who believes? You love God and his commands. Love them, not just do them, but love them. For the love of God is all about keeping the commandments, and those commandments are not burdensome. (Are John and I really talking about the same commandments here?)

Does that mean if I don't keep the commandments, I am not loving God, and if I am not loving God is that born of my disbelief? And if I am not believing am I not born of God? No wonder I cannot keep those commandments.

This line of reasoning will result in despair.

I don't think that is where John wants us to go. Let me take a stab at another way to read this, perhaps you will have a better one. This all hinges on the incarnation which John articulated in chapter 4. Whoever believes that Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, the human being, is the Son of God, that one is born of God. The denial of the divinity of Jesus or the humanity of Christ is not born of God, and I believe there are really only two options there when it comes to Jesus' lineage in John's view.

If you love the father, you also love his children, and those children of course would be anyone who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. We love those children when we keep the commandments of God. But then it gets all weird on us. The commands are not burdensome. The heck they aren't. Have you tried going an hour without sinning, a day? Have you tried even just loving all the people who are in church? Even that guy who really annoys you!?

But that might not be quite what John has in mind. The commandment to love one another is a relationship command, not a purity command. What I mean by that is that in the Old Testament we are often exhorted to keep all the commandments, laws, statutes, decrees, etc of the Torah. But when you go in and actually read that Torah it is mostly about how to restore the broken relationship through the sacrificial system. Loving the brother is not really about keeping all the commandments, but it is about loving the brother. That means remaining in that relationship which God has established. We will still sin, John has already acknowledged that. The guy who talks too much or who sings off key may be really annoying. But the Christian has a way to deal with that, it's called repentance and forgiveness. That is loving the brother and that is keeping the divine command. This is not some impossible to keep holiness code which lays on us a burden which is impossible to keep, in the same way that the Sermon on the Mount crushes under its demands.

This is the victory that overcomes the world itself: the love expressed in forgiveness. It is not a perfect life which is described, but a perfect solution to our profoundly imperfect lives which is being described here. The preacher may want to ask what is it about believing that Jesus is the Son of God that enables us to overcome the world? When I believe in Jesus – the sins of my neighbor change for me. They are already overcome. The world would have me at best perhaps

understand those sins, but it would understand if I wanted to get even. But that is not overcoming those sins. They are still there. Jesus has removed them. When I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, I can look at any evil and know that He is bigger than the bad. That means I can look at the brother who has hurt me, the neighbor, the fellow congregant or the unbeliever down the street, God has died for that sin. That empowers me to overcome the world. I don't have to get even. I get to forgive the sin. That is actually much better than getting even. I am a herald of God's forgiveness, a proclaimer of this truth. I forgive people. That burden is on Jesus, not me. That is why it is not burdensome. He has borne that burden.

The second paragraph is a little easier: it is so sacramental. We know very little about the first century congregations or what their worship was like, but I always conjecture from this that they were profoundly sacramental. We know that they were later. The Spirit, the water and the blood all testify. To what do they testify? They testify to the real death that Jesus died, the blood and water that ran out of his side is the very blood of the sacrament, the very water of our baptism. Christ has become a real human being to redeem real human beings. For some reason he loves the hairless apes we have become.

Sermon Idea: Living with the Victory of Christ (Epistle – that the victory of Christ would find expression in the hearer's life through strong relationships, lived out in active and intentional forgiveness.)

This sermon will draw upon the Gospel reading for today. There we hear Jesus empowering the words of forgiveness which the disciples and we speak.

At its heart, this sermon will want to address the core of this idea and that is of course the work of Christ in our lives. I would suggest that the clearest exposition of that is forgiveness today. Not only because most people don't understand it but it is also something which I think this world needs. It needs communities of congregations that practice forgiveness, real forgiveness, regularly. Notice from the ministry and the crucifixion of Christ that Jesus' love is for his enemies. We have lots of folks who assert they are our enemies. ISIS and Atheists all want us to go away. But Jesus loved those who pounded the nails and the folks who chanted "crucify!" Christians really have no enemies. Yes there are those who declare themselves my enemy. When I say this I am not insinuating that the soldier who defends from an attack or the policeman who uses deadly force in order to protect the public has done wrong in fulfilling his vocation. But the Christian who gloats over the death of these enemies has missed the point. Jesus died even for the folks of whom I am afraid. They are not really an enemy, not in the truest sense.

It is also important to note that the world has defined love with a narrative which is not biblical at all. The default narrative behind the word love which most will bring to church involves kittens, hearts, and cuteness. We will want to talk about the woman in Baltimore who came down to the riots a few years ago, grabbed her sixteen year old son by the ear, and hauled him home. Love is not a feeling but an action. This woman loved her son by embarrassing him and not caring about how he felt but about the fact that he was doing something stupid and might just get himself killed. So she did something for him. It did not feel good but it was love.

When we forgive, Christ's victory over sin is clearly seen in our fellowship and in our lives. We become the living proclamation of Christ's victory. It is not a victory of long ago, but it is a victory over the sins that plague all human lives today. When I forgive them, I am really plugging into that work of Christ. When I deal with them with the feeble resources of the world, understanding and grudge-bearing, I am obscuring Christ's victory at best, more likely I am denying it.

The hard thing will be for the sea change in ethos and attitudes this will mean for many in our parishes who have completely inculcated their faith. We understand being American is to be Christian and so the differentiation between the larger culture and the ways of the Christian faith are not always comfortable for us. We need to say that the culture in which we live has a really messed up way to deal with problems and sins. We have a better way and we need to start living it out. That way is not vengeance or anger, it is not understanding the psychology of the evil doer, but it is forgiveness. That forgiveness is spoken and applied, it frees both the perpetrator and the one who has been wronged from all sorts of things, including the need to get even. But more importantly it applies the love of God to this very situation I am living in.

This opens the doors for love where sin had shut them tight. This opens the doors to joy when sin's suffering and pain had clamped down upon us. This is the community John envisions in the Gospel and Epistle readings. This is living with the victory of Christ.

John 20:19-31 *I have included the end of the prior narrative of Mary and Jesus at the tomb.*

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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."

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

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ 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.

Luther (*Luther loved preaching these texts and there are multiple sermons available. Lenker’s Translation provides four of them. The first is on faith, an excerpt of which is recorded here. The second addresses the fear of the disciples which Luther immediately turns into a fear before a righteous God, the third sermon pursues the office of the keys, and the last sermon addresses Thomas’ unbelief and how Christ rescued him from that unbelief. All are worth reading.*)

1. This Gospel praises the fruit of faith, and illustrates its nature and character. Among the fruits of faith are these two: peace and joy, as St. Paul writes in the Galatians, where he mentions in order all kinds of fruit...In the first place, Christ stands there among the disciples, who sit in fear and terror, and whose hearts are greatly troubled every hour expecting death; to them he comes and comforts them, saying: “Peace be unto you.” this is one fruit. In the second place there follows from this sweet word the other fruit, that they were glad when they saw the Lord. Then he further bestows upon faith power and authority over all things in heaven and on earth, and truly extols it in that he says “As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” And again: “Receive ye the Holy Spirit: Whosoever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them; whosoever sins ye retain. They are retained.

2. Faith, as we have often said, is of the nature that everyone appropriates to himself the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, of which we have already said enough; namely, that it is not sufficient simply to believe Christ rose from the dead, for this produces neither peace nor joy, neither power nor authority; but you must believe that he rose for your sake, for your benefit, and was not glorified for his own sake; but that he might help you and all who believe in him, and that through his resurrection sin, death, and hell are vanquished and the victory given to you.

3. This is signified by Christ entering through closed doors, and standing in the midst of his disciples. For this standing denotes nothing else than that he is standing in our hearts; there he is in the midst of us, so that he is ours, as he stands there and they have him among them. And when he thus stands within our hearts, we at once hear his loving voice saying to the troubled

consciences: Peace, there is no danger; your sins are forgiven and blotted out, and they shall harm you no more.

4. And this entrance the Lord made here through barred doors, going through wood and stone, and still leaving everything whole, breaking nothing, yet getting in among his disciples. This illustrates how the Lord comes into our hearts and stands in us, namely, through the office of the ministry. Therefore, since God has commanded me to preach his Word, one should in no wise despise a mortal man into whose mouth he has put his Word; lest we get the idea that everyone one must expect a special message from heaven, and that God should speak to him by the word of his mouth. For if he imparts faith to any one, he does it by means of the preaching of man and the external word of man.

This is going through closed doors, when he comes into the heart through the Word, not breaking nor displacing anything. For when the Word of God comes, it neither injures the conscience, nor deranges the understanding of the heart and the external senses; as the false teachers do who break all the doors and windows, breaking through like thieves, leaving nothing whole and undamaged, and perverting, falsifying and injuring all life. Conscience, reason, and the senses. Christ does not do thus. Such now is the power of the Word of God. Thus we have two parts, preaching and believing. His coming to us is preaching; his standing in our hearts is faith. For it is not sufficient that he stands before our eyes and ears; he must stand in the midst of us in our hearts, and offer and impart to us peace.

5. For the fruit of faith is peace; not only that which one has outwardly, but that of which Paul speaks to the Philippians (4:7) saying it is a peace that passeth all reason, sense and understanding. And where this peace is, one shall not and cannot judge according to reason.

7. This is the true peace that satisfies and quiets the heart; not in times when no adversity is at hand, but in the midst of adversity, when outwardly there is nothing but strife before the eyes. And this is the difference between worldly and spiritual peace. Worldly peace consists in removing the outward evil that disturbs the peace;...Such is the case with poverty and sickness. While they afflict you, you are not contented; but when they are removed and you are rid of the distress, there is peace and rest again from without. But he who experiences this is not changed, being just as fainthearted whether the evil be present or not; only he feels it and is frightened when it is present.

8. Christian or spiritual peace, however, just turns the thing about, so that outwardly the evil remains, as enemies, sickness, poverty, sin, death, and the devil. These are there and never desist, encompassing us on every side; nevertheless, within there is peace, strength and comfort in the heart, so that the heart cares for no evil, yea, is really bolder and more joyful in its presence than it is in its absence. Therefore it is peace which passeth and transcedeth all understanding and all the senses.

10. From this peace the other fruit now follows, as is taught in this Gospel. When Christ came to the disciples and said: "Peace be unto you!" and showed them his hands and feet; then they were glad that they saw the Lord. Yes, to be sure they had to be glad, for that they saw Christ was the greatest joy the heart of man can experience. Hitherto we have been permitted to see our hands, that is, we have been taught to trust in our works; this brought no gladness. But to see Christ makes us glad. And this takes place by faith.

This text is filled with fascinating sermons. Don't you love this picture of Thomas touching Jesus? It was made by Caravaggio. Notice how Jesus has grabbed his wrist and won't let him back off out of some squeamishness. Look how the artist has Thomas' finger inside the wound of Christ. Notice too the intensity of the other disciples who are also watching and wondering about what Thomas is experiencing. Had he simply expressed the very questions they too had felt?



I thought that there was so much to say here I actually created six sermon ideas we could use to discuss this.

Sermon 1 – Jesus shows up in their midst, through locked doors and windows. He does not pass through the locked doors and windows, but was there all along, and now he reveals himself. This is especially true in that when he shows up the second time, the night when Thomas is there, he does not have to be told about Thomas' faithless words, he walks right up to Tom and has him touch his hands. He was right there when Thomas expressed his doubts. Jesus, the resurrected Lord is with us as well. It is his promise to us. That is both good and bad news. Bad if we have been sinning, or least it might make us afraid of him, but really good when you remember he has holes in his hands and feet that Thomas touched and which are the marks of his forgiveness for us.

For confirmands, wouldn't this be a great sermon. Jesus goes with you out these doors and into that high school, he empowers your words so that when you forgive, that is real, real in heaven and on earth. Of course, for a typical American Christian, you will need to define forgiveness, this is not just saying that "it's ok." You are dealing with something which is eternal. You will need to know what sin is, what the consequences are, and what forgiveness actually does, it removes the debt, it takes the sin away.

We thought that this sermon might be structured on asking why Jesus rose from the dead? Why did God not just count Good Friday as good enough? Why do we need this resurrection? Is it merely the witness to what will happen at the last day? That seems rather inadequate. Is it not rather that Jesus rose from the dead to be our Savior today? Jesus rose to deal with Thomas's doubt. Jesus rose to comfort Mary at the tomb. Jesus rose to be present in our worship today, to bless us and care for us and to empower our lives and service.

Sermon 2 – Jesus says peace to you, shows them his hands, they are overjoyed, and then he says peace again. Notice that in the middle of the peace which Jesus offers are the very wounds of Christ and Joy at experiencing them. Everyone wants peace. Who wouldn't? If you don't build that peace on the wounds of Christ, the salvation event, the Joy will be absent and the peace will not be genuine. But with the wounds of Christ in there, the wounds which forgive every sin and which heal every affliction of sin, we have a real peace. This peace is established between God and the sinner and between the sinners and one another. For where Christ's blood has been shed and applied, the sin is removed.

Sermon 3 – He breathes on them and empowers their forgiveness. This the closest John gets to Pentecost in his telling of the Jesus story. Notice the connection between the Spirit and the miracle of Absolution. I had a retired friend who always spoke about the miracles of Sunday morning and he always called absolution a miracle. This is an "act of God" beyond human expectation or realism. God forgives in my words and yours too. The disciples and you, and the people who are sitting before you, all have been given that same Spirit and your words have likewise been empowered. This is a sermon on the office of the keys. When we forgive someone, those words actually work, they do something "real." These are not merely words, because God stands behind our words. Absolution is the kingdom of God breaking into our reality. The sin is truly expunged and the guilt is actually removed; there is no more to be said. God does not and will not remember them. That is real power. This is why I usually have the handshaking/greeting and "peace sharing" time of the congregation after the absolution. I tell the congregation that God has just done something to them and their neighbors which makes this handshake of peace possible.

As we note above, forgiveness cannot be assumed by a preacher any more. Forgiveness is not simply saying "It's OK!" as it is usually expressed in the jargon of the day. Forgiveness is saying about a sin that it is wrong, it always speaks the truth about the wrong, but it is not afraid to do so because the Christian has the answer to this. We tend to see "sin" purely as a moral and horizontal affair, and often we only use the term to describe really painful and 'large' sins. We have lost sight of the fact that sin is actually creating a God problem for us. It separates us from God, it has a vertical dimension too. You might just reference Psalm 51 here – David murders a man, commits adultery, but confesses that he has sinned against God, and against him only has he sinned.

The Christian recognizes that while the sin might have hurt me, it might not have had anything to do with me, he can still forgive it. It takes me out of the equation. It isn't about me, it is about this person and their relationship with God.

How will we communicate the weight of sin? Do we really think our gossip is a God problem? Most high school students don't think cheating is wrong. We have often made acceptable things which are profoundly broken and wrong. Society has told us that living together is an acceptable alternative. This sermon will be most effective if we have avoided Cheap Grace. If we think sin is a small problem, this solution will be a slight thing. But if we can somehow communicate that sin is a real and serious problem, then we have a blessing to offer.

Robert Capon said that the murderer and the guy who simply tells a dirty joke might be on the opposite ends of a long line of sinners, but the truth is they are all marching in the wrong direction and end up in the wrong place. The relative size of a sin is not nearly as important as the fact that sin of any size cuts the sinner off from God.

Sermon 4 – Jesus confronts Thomas. Do you know someone who is a disbeliever? Does that bother you? It bothers Jesus too and he is doing something about it. Thomas' unbelief is a problem which Jesus solves. The disciples did their job. They bore witness to him, he disbelieved and Jesus took care of that. Likewise he does not lay on us the demand that our words be effective or result in someone's faith. He will take care of that. His word (seed) is good and it bears fruit, sometimes.



Jesus confronts Thomas, not with a lightning bolt or some sort of retribution, but with those wounded hands and side. Thomas is led to kneel and offer the only words which he can say, "My Lord and my God." Thomas according to tradition took the Gospel east from Jerusalem, ending up in India. The picture on the right is from the St Thom Cathedral in Chennai where some of his bones are said to lie. In fact, one of his fingers is supposed to be here. Is it the very finger that explored the wounds of Christ? We thought that this might be combined with sermon 5 to make a great Confirmation sermon – really using Thomas as a model for Christ confronting us and then using us to confront others in their unbelief.

Sermon 5 – These words are written so that you may believe. Jesus is glad that Thomas has seen and believes, that he makes his confession, but your faith, without the sight, is even more precious in Jesus' sight. He blesses you and me, and all who believe in these words today. Jesus blesses all those who believe without seeing. That would be the folks who are sitting in front of you on Sunday. Jesus says to them that their faith puts them into a blessed position which Thomas does not enjoy. Remember this crew is likely the folks who come every Sunday. This might be a time to tell them that Jesus sees their faith and loves it. He is glad that they are there, notices them. I think sometimes the old regulars have come to believe that God seems to have

forgotten about them, and I think sometimes we are so focused on “evangelism” and “brining in some young families” that the folks who are there every week could feel neglected. God sees them. He likes them.

Sermon 6 – This book is written that you may believe and by believing have life in Jesus name. Jesus has also done something about unbelief, he has sent John and given him to write a book. He has sent his evangelists and pastors and parents and loved ones into your life to be the conduit of his grace to you. He also is sending you to be the conduit of that grace to another. Can you imagine the joy to watching a Thomas fall on his knees? Can you imagine the exhilaration of seeing the light bulb go on in someone as they come to faith in Jesus? Perhaps you don’t have to imagine it, perhaps you can remember it. God used John, God used Thomas, God uses you too, The Kingdom comes through his people. That is an exciting prospect for us. If you cannot find a few things to preach on this day, there may not be any hope for you. ☺

Truthfully, the real challenge is to stick to one sermon. Remember this story comes around again next year. You don’t have to preach them all today.

God will give you to preach a great sermon!

Remember Jesus loves you too. That is a present tense reality, not a past, nor a future, but a right now truth. He rose from the dead in order to love you.