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Easter 2 Series A 2017

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Second Sunday of Easter, April 23

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 Luke, Peter and John both 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. Peter also notices their faith, and the love which comes from that faith, and he encourages and blesses them as well. 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 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 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?

We thought Peter's words about being ready to share the reason for our hope with gentleness and respect were a good witness to Christ. Standing on a corner yelling at the homosexual is not doing this. We also thought that being somewhat fearless about that. We have to be ready to be unpopular, ridiculed, or otherwise rejected by the society. Sometimes it is something less than spectacular or public. We might simply collect money for the local pregnancy shelter and show the women who are there that Christ does tangibly care for them. I knew a fellow who

evangelized the wait staff at restaurants. He would ask them if there was something to pray for in their lives.

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 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 Moralizing Therapeutic Deism (MTD) has infected our members. This is the religion which 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 may 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.

Acts 5:29-42

²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.” ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. ³⁵ And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” So they took his advice, ⁴⁰ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

We will be reading from the Acts of the Apostles for the next several weeks, so get used to calling this the “first reading” instead of the Old Testament.

I occasionally get to teach a course on the Gospels of Mark and Luke. I am increasingly taken by the sense of humor that Luke has. In the paragraphs which precede our reading today, Luke tells the story of the Sanhedrin's arrest of Peter and John and their subsequent release from prison with the help of an angel. The Sanhedrin is portrayed as insanely jealous of them. Peter and John simply return to the temple to start preaching. The prison guard who are unaware that their charges have escaped, are shocked to find the cells empty. They are pondering the implications of this, likely it will mean someone will be put to death, when suddenly they get the report that the fellows they are looking for are actually in the temple preaching again. They brought Peter and John again before the Sanhedrin, but this time they requested their presence, no force was used. How do you force guys who just walk out of prison without you noticing? The Sanhedrin which sought to make Peter and John afraid found that they were afraid.

But this more than just an amusing story of disciples putting one over on the nasty old Sadducees. Isn't it interesting that the Saducees in verse 17 were consumed with jealousy? They are not decrying them as heretics or speakers of an untruth, they are jealous for their power and position. Does Christianity today continue to challenge the powerful? Have we sometimes allowed our message to be muted because we are fond of power ourselves and a little to "cozy" with the powerbrokers?

It is the end of the passage, however, which really points out how different these men are from us. These disciples look like strangers to us. They rejoice when they are persecuted and things seem to be going badly. They thank God for the privilege of suffering. Do we hold up these disciples as exemplars, but impossible exemplars to imitate? Remember that a few weeks before this, these very disciples had fled from Gethsemane. They had been cowards. Now they are brave, it would seem that the transformation is the fact that while they are witnesses, so is the Holy Spirit who now is witnessing to Jesus with them. Therein lies the transformation of these men and the people to whom we will preach today.

Looking at the whole passage, there are three things which are really striking in this passage. The first is Peter's sermon which is not designed to bring peace but anxiety to the audience. It is not normal for us to think about the Jesus story being alarming, but notice that the people whom Jesus is addressing are in fact the very Sanhedrin who killed him in the first place. They thought they would get rid of this Galilean prophet and his band of pesky followers this way, but it was not so. Peter states it boldly. When forced into the choice, they must obey God rather than men. This would be one of the most often quoted verses of the Lutheran Reformation era and a favorite of Luther when confronting the Pope.

The second point I want you to notice the speech by Gamaliel who is held up here as being wise. This is natural because he was Paul's teacher and remember that Luke is Paul's traveling companion and closely associated with him. His logic is impeccable, but it is also hard to follow. They were ready to kill Peter and John but he dissuades them. If this is from man, it will fall apart. If it is from God, then we cannot stop it and to oppose it is to oppose God. This is real wisdom, but when do we apply it? When does this fit our world today? When does it not. I have honestly heard Peter's bit about following God and not men used to excuse some pretty egregiously bad behavior. Likewise, Gamaliel's advice seems tailored to a very passive oversight of what could be really problematic behavior. Obviously John exhorts us to test the spirits, other times we are told to resist and speak out sharply against those who speak against the name of Christ or teach false doctrine. When does one act and when does one simply say that we must simply wait to see if it succeeds?

When does this basic principal apply to the world in which we live? Does it?

Is there a good sermon in here to ask whether we are Peters or Gamaliels? Does Gamaliel offer up his wise words in the context of the miraculous release of these men? Does that matter? Does Peter's boldness and authority in this situation apply to mine? When does it, when does it not?

The last point I think is worthy of mention in here is the reaction of the disciples to the abuse heaped upon Peter and John. There are no calls to their lawyers, no appeals to the media to cover this story. No one runs to an NGO like Amnesty International and seeks validation or status as an abused minority. Now, granted, those were simply not all options in the first century, but they don't complain. Quite the opposite, they thank God for the chance to suffer for the Gospel. They thank God! And then they did not change one thing about what they were doing! There is absolutely no accommodation to the persecuting forces. Despite the persecution they did not conform to the demand of the Sanhedrin, but kept right on preaching. This had quite an impact. By chapter 6 it looks like many of the priests were coming over. Eventually even one of Gamaliel's disciples, the white-hot Saul of Tarsus will become the white-hot Christian apostle Paul. Was he sitting there watching all this transpire? Most likely he was.

Psalm 148

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

² Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his hosts!

³ Praise him, sun and moon,

praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens,

and you waters above the heavens!

⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD!

For he commanded and they were created.

⁶ And he established them forever and ever;

he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.

⁷ Praise the LORD from the earth,

you great sea creatures and all deeps,

⁸ fire and hail, snow and mist,

stormy wind fulfilling his word!

⁹ Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰ Beasts and all livestock,

creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹ Kings of the earth and all peoples,

princes and all rulers of the earth!

¹² Young men and maidens together,

old men and children!

¹³ Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his majesty is above earth and heaven.
¹⁴ He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his saints,
for the people of Israel who are near to him.
Praise the LORD!

I Peter 1:3-9

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

This text is a natural opportunity for a sermon. An Epistle Sermon Theme: “Born to a living hope” The resurrection of Christ is not just about him, it is of course about us too. We are the adopted children of God, promised an astounding inheritance which the entire world shall see on that last day. But now, while we wait, we are given a great joy. For though we have not seen him, we believe, we love him and in that love and belief we have an inexpressibly great joy. This may present a contrast with what we experience here and now, but that means that the joy we feel simply stands out the more. That we are a people of hope is our best evangelistic tool. The joy we feel in Christ is contagious. This is the day to introduce the theme of an evangelistic hope. The preacher might want to simply work with the three adjectives Peter uses to describe the hope which is a living hope. .

1. *Imperishable – we often put our hopes in things that disappoint us and such hope is broken and shattered. Jesus gives an imperishable hope. This promise is never broken.*

2. *Undefiled* - A defiled hope would be one which has been profoundly disappointed. A defiled hope would be the hope in the guy who really lets you down. But Jesus is an object of hope who never sullies that hope with his moral or other failings.
3. *Unfading* – Hope that does not see immediate fulfillment can also fade. But people who have this hope regularly attest that it does not fade.

Peter himself may well be the story here. The first reading is the imperishable hope – the Sanhedrin literally tries to beat it out of him. Peter’s hope is undefiled – not because Peter got it right. We know that Peter got it profoundly wrong, but Jesus restored him to that hope, undefiled because Jesus died and rose again. Peter’s hope is unfading – we see that in this reading. Peter’s people are persecuted, it is likely he writes because he is facing his own martyr’s death.

This inheritance is kept in heaven for Peter and audience, out of reach of our enemy. God holds it in his strong hands.

We might want to ask if our God a happy God. I think that is a more important question than many of us realize. You will tend to reflect your God. I once read an editor of a small newspaper commenting on the many pastors he had gotten to know. He thought that Lutheran clergy were the only pastors he knew who were capable of a full belly laugh. The rest of them were either too sophisticated or too immersed in piety to let loose with such jocularity.

That is not a bad way to be described. I fundamentally believe that God has pure and boundless joy. Anything less either is a deficiency in him or makes us far too important, because the only thing we can imagine that would sadden God would be our own failings. If God is sad, it must be our fault. The truth is much better. God is not reacting to us, He acts on our behalf, but he is not reacting to us. His nature, his very being is joyful. The closer we are to God, the greater our joy becomes. I think Luke is helping us see this in the first lesson. There are times and places when the best thing to do is simply to laugh. Christ’s resurrection made the earliest Christians irrepressibly merry. You could beat them and they would still be happy.

That joy, born of the hope we have in Christ Jesus because he has died and risen from the grave, is an incredibly attractive thing to people, especially, as Peter notes here, when it is seen amid trials. The earliest Christians often sang when they were thrown to the lions in Roman amphitheaters. The Romans marveled at their faith in action and flocked to the Christian movement.

You have probably all known the dear soul in your congregation who has stood up under the pressure of cancer or some other ailment, bravely smiling through a difficult day. You might think of them as a sermon illustration, especially if they have died in relatively recent memory. This is the Easter season after all. Our joyful memories of these departed are not all sad because Jesus has given us the resurrection from the dead.

This attractive joy is the product of a couple of things. First of all it is born of Faith. Though we do not see him, we believe. This joy is not the faith, but it is the fruit of the faith. But then you have to ask about that in which the person believes. The person who feels this joy is reflecting a reality which God has declared. We have an inheritance in heaven, a treasure which cannot fade or be stolen from us. We are God's children – he has declared us to be so by the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus who is our Lord. This too would be a great message for a confirmation Sunday. The most important thing to be said about me has already been said by God, and nothing the world can say will change this. I am a child of God, an heir of heaven. My Jesus lives. I have eternal life. The world simply cannot change this reality no matter what it throws at me. I have an unshakable confidence.

As we work back up the text from the end, we notice especially that God is the actor in this, a sure sign we have pure Gospel at work. We have been given a new birth in Christ, God has effected a whole new life in His Son for us to live. The true joy of this faith is a joy lived in a relationship with God in which he is the Father and we are the children. What marks the child of God in this city? What marks the child of God in your home? What marks the child of God who worships in this place? These are not things of which we are embarrassed, but things of which we are proud.

Another Sermon Theme: The Easter Difference (That the Holy Spirit would give the hearer to be Easter People in this time and place.)

Easter makes a difference. The world is pretty well done with its Easter. The bunnies are put away, the Easter candy is either sold and consumed or on the discount rack. But God's people are not done with Easter, are never done with Easter because it continues to shape and change and make a difference in our lives and for our faith.

Peter says we have a living hope, not some forlorn wish, but in the real sense of hope, an expectation that Jesus who has risen from the dead, is right here, right now. And he will be there as well on the day of resurrection for me and all human beings.

Peter wrote to a people under persecution. He doesn't say that Easter takes away the trials, but Easter has changed them. They are not the end but are an occasion for Jesus to do great, refining work in our lives.

This sermon will hit the baptismal imagery. We died in baptism and were given a new life that day. That life is not the life that dies on the day the world sees us die. That life is eternal and it is now. I do not start my eternal life some time in the future, but it started on the day I was baptized. Peter writes to his persecuted people to live that life, it is imperishable and unfading.

*“Do not abandon yourselves to despair: We are the Easter people and Hallelujah is our song.”
– Pope John Paul II.*

The preacher may want to point to Peter himself as evidence of this. He was huddled in an upper room on that first Easter night, doors locked because he was afraid of the Jews. Yet in the Acts

text we see this same Peter boldly confronting those same Jewish leaders and declaring that he is not going to shut up but he will proclaim this Christ. What has changed? Easter happened. Jesus breathed the Spirit of God on him and that made a difference. Of course, Jesus also reinstated him, forgave him, and recommissioned him. But the point is that Jesus, the living resurrected Jesus, took a fearful fisherman and made him courageous and eloquent.

Jesus is working those same sorts of changes today. We notice in our congregations that often they confess the resurrection but we struggle to see that confession take shape in life and word (see the collect). We want with this sermon that our people would trust the many promises that God has made to each one of us. That is the difference we want Easter to make in their lives. We see that taking shape in the way we approach suffering as Peter's people were called to do. We see it in the way we approach death, but also work, relationships, and neighbors.

Too often our Easter consists of saying "He is risen!" He is Risen indeed, Alleluia! But then we really just want to know who brought the donuts this Sunday or if someone forgot to make coffee. We seem to be going through the motions of Easter. How do we fix that? Peter is not going through the motions. He took that love of Jesus out the door started doing it. It got him in trouble in the Acts reading today, he did it anyway. As John says in his first Epistle (chapter 4) that when we love, we abide in God and he abides in us. That is good. Jesus lives – so we feed the hungry, we befriend the lonely, we love the sinner; we love.

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.

This text is filled with fascinating sermons. Don't you love this picture of Thomas touching Jesus? 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 “bringing in some young families” that the folks who are there every week could feel neglected. God sees them. He likes them.

This sermon might present an opportunity to address the hermeneutic of suspicion which dominates much of modern culture. We have been burned so many times, we put up the sign behind our counter that says “No Checks Accepted.” The merchant has it there because he does not trust the patrons of his own store. We have often assumed that attitude. Consider how many documents we need to sign in order to get a mortgage. We live in a society that demands proof and guarantees. But Jesus calls the one who believes without seeing, blessed.

This is hard. We really resonate with Thomas in this. We want to put out our hands and touch, see, prove to ourselves that this is real. But not many of us will get that chance, at least like Thomas. Yet, John doesn’t seem to think that we need it. Indeed, he seems to suggest that the one who believes without that touch and sight is “blessed.” How does that blessing happen? How does the Thomas in me get faith?

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who does this, but the preacher will want to proclaim that this happens, and it might be good to speak of the how/what of that. Word and Sacraments are the go-to tools to talk about here. But I think we need to have stories here, stories of real people whom we know for whom he has worked this faith. The question of whether we have faith is alien to Lutheran thinking. The question is whether we have Christ, the answer to that is that Christ has baptized us, Christ has fed us with himself, Christ has been proclaimed to us and we have heard his voice. The question is not whether we have faith, but whether we have Christ. The question is not whether we believe but whether Christ has died for us, has he forgiven my sins. When we say yes to these things Jesus turns to us today and says, “Blessed are you!”

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.