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Easter 2 Series C 2016

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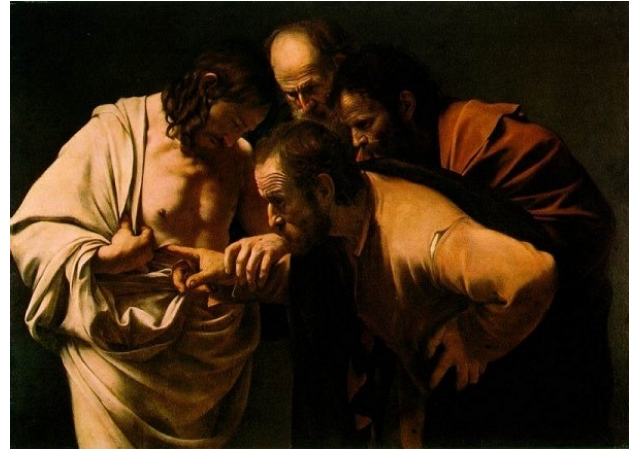
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Second Sunday of Easter – April 3

The Second Sunday of Easter always retells the story of Jesus in the upper room with the disciples and the disbelief of Thomas, the story graphically retold in the picture to the right by the master painter, Caravaggio. Thomas really wasn't doubting, he was flat out disbelieving that Jesus had risen. Notice how the light plays in this picture, falling on Thomas' head at the very moment of his enlightenment. I also especially like how Jesus has taken Thomas' hand in this picture and is forcing him to touch the wound, as if Thomas was reluctant but Jesus will have none of that squeamishness. Thirdly, I like what the artist has done with the other disciples. They believed because they saw, but they are just as intensely curious about this seemingly private moment of Jesus and his disciple.



Today we might just want to wrestle with the resurrection in terms of the challenge it presents to us as thinking, rational people. Thomas struggled with the resurrection, as any human being must struggle with it. I think we are often too hard on dear old Tom. He is really only giving voice to things which are rattling around in our own minds.

Fifty years ago, however, this was actually a much larger problem. In the 1950's and 1960's there were many thoughtful essays written on the resurrection and the difficult intellectual challenge this presented to the modern man. Today when we read them, they seem almost quaint and certainly they are asking a set of questions which our generation is only moderately interested in. We live in an age of increasing credulity. Just watch the bogus emails flying around the ether and how many of them are not passed along to you by sincere and frankly credulous people. Hardly a week goes by that the IT department doesn't send me an email warning me not to open emails from people who are offering something that seems too good to be true. We live in an age of belief, in fact we are too quick to believe too much, I think.

Personally, I believe this decade to be a particularly ripe opportunity for Christianity and a time of significant danger for a great number of people. It is a time of opportunity because there are many people who are asking faith questions in this context. My students in my classrooms are. They are searching for meaning and community and all the right things. That is good and it offers Christianity an amazing opportunity if we can simply get out of our own buildings and fortresses and engage with this society in meaningful ways.

But it also is a time of particular danger for a great number of people, because they naively believe themselves to be the masters of this destiny, they imagine can walk through life with a sort of cafeteria of faith options before them, of which Christianity is but one. A little Buddhism on the side, a helping of karma, a solid main course of Gaia, and the occasional visit to the monastery constitutes a spiritual life. This is dangerous because they have a real enemy who would like them to be blithely unaware of the minefields through which they walk, until they are

so lost in error's maze they cannot get out or they have been swallowed by death's impenetrable darkness. Little do many realize that in fact this is not a cafeteria of spiritual options, but all of them involve slavery, even Christianity, as Paul often calls himself the slave of Christ. The question is really to which one we will be enslaved. Whose mark will we bear? Is that even my choice to make? I rather think we must be called to this obedience, and it must be created within us.

Three years ago we wondered just what makes the resurrection difficult to believe. Here are a few ideas we came up with.

1. **So rare!**
2. Many of us are convinced that miracles happen, but we make them through miracles and technology. We cannot undo death yet, so the resurrection is hard for us to swallow.
3. Is it simply a lingering sense of sinful unworthiness that clings so tightly to us? Can someone as miserable as me be the beneficiary of such blessing? Does this actually drive folks? Some it does, but not all. Most of these are found in Lutheran pews.
4. Death is necessary – no life is possible without death. My garden is only fertile because it is full of dead and rotting stuff. Resurrection fundamentally contradicts our biology.
5. God's Word simply doesn't have authority – it is merely another religious text. Higher Criticism, denominationalism, Pentecostalism, and even the way we do Sunday School today may have all contributed to undermining the authority of God's Word in the lives of our people.
6. The church has not effectively taught entire generations of people how to pass along the faith to their children. We have assumed that to be American is to be Christian, but that has not been true for a very long time. Catechesis can no longer assume that we are receiving Christians who need a little Lutheran doctrine. We have to inculcate them to the ways of doing the Christians things and then we can talk about the doctrine. Doctrine does not produce deeds, but deeds produce the doctrine.
7. Is the problem today not disbelief but indifference? Why don't folks see this as relevant? Why will they make excuses or bow out of worship and not delight in the presence of Christ? Do many let their kids opt for soccer or baseball games because they just don't know Jesus themselves? Are they afraid?

Great hymn in LSB and elsewhere: [These Things did Thomas Count as Real](#)

What does Jesus' encounter with Thomas and the rest of the disciples tell us about faith? They had the promises. The women had come to them with testimony, and yet they apparently do not believe until Jesus shows up. Our culture wants faith to be something that resides in our will, an act of our own decision. But is John really saying that faith itself requires the active intervention of Jesus? It would seem that even the disciples needed Jesus to act. Do we really think we can decide to believe? Or does Jesus give us faith?

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, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The faithful have sung the Easter songs with all the others who came Easter morning. Probably a little weary from all the festivities and the activities, the banner making, hauling the lilies in and out, the extra stint ushering, counting all that money, etc. now they have come back. "We who celebrated the Lord's resurrection..." That's us. This is a prayer for the folks who come the next Sunday, when it is no longer about Easter egg hunts, pretty dresses, and trumpet voluntaries. When we are back to the same old crowd and same old worship and we settle back into our pew to meet our same old Jesus. We are home. It is a good place to be. If I sound like I am belittling this experience, please don't read it that way. There is something beautiful about the obedient and faithful worship of the folks who come out on that Sunday after Easter.

We ask God today that by his grace we may confess in life and conversation, word and deed, that Jesus Christ is Lord and God. Of course those words come from the Gospel reading today, it is what Thomas says after he touches the wounds of Christ. It is a good thing to say, but perhaps also a frightening thing to say.

We call him Lord. If you want to read the book on this, and I highly recommend it, pick up a copy of Larry Hurtado's "Lord Jesus Christ" which explores the confession of Christ in the earliest documents of the Christian movement. It really changed the way I teach my classes and I am very glad I read it early in my teaching career. He did not say much of anything I did not already believe, but he gave what I believed a great deal of intellectual and scholarly footing on which to stand. I should warn you that it is not an easy read, but it is well worth the effort. You might also pick up N. T. Wright's book simply entitled "Resurrection."

To call Christ Lord is to make a profound theological statement. The Lord is the one who parted the Red Sea and helped David defeat Goliath. For a pious first century Jew to use such a word to refer to anyone other than God was unthinkable. When Thomas falls down upon his knees he makes a serious theological statement with this word. We tend to take this as an emotional response. It was, surely, but also a theological statement on his part.

As Paul will explore in several of his letters, they also took the Lordship of Jesus rather seriously. They often suggested that they were his slaves, his servants, his underlings. I believe that many of the Christians to which I have preached have been more than willing to call Jesus Lord but I am not sure that they have often been under his rule. As a society we love to idolize the free spirit, the independent man, the self-determining human being who makes his or her own rules and perhaps follows them. But for the first Christians, when they called Jesus Lord they meant that he called the shots, he set the boundaries, he gave the orders.

I can see this no more clearly than in our use of the word conscience. For Paul and other biblical authors the conscience was a gift from God which smote them when they had done

something wrong. But look at how we use this word today. If I tell you I must follow my conscience, chances are that means I am about to break the rules. My conscience has become, not a gift from God which points out my sin, but a license to be autonomous and do what I see fit.

I read one Roman Catholic political commentator who wryly noted that the Roman Catholic moral agenda in congress would be significantly advanced if every Roman Catholic in congress lost the next election to either a Moslem or a Mormon. Would the same be said of the Lutheran delegation in congress? Is it time to take the Lordship of Christ seriously and get schooled in the fine art of obedience? I think that obedience is a concept of which we are very afraid.

And so we ask God's grace to confess Christ with word and deed today. What would that look like? Does the resurrection mean that I can no longer say that I am in charge of my life, but that my Lord lives and he directs it? Is it time to be a witness through our obedience? Is it time we make sure that everyone who looks at us knows that we follow some rules that we did not make up, rules which we may always like, a way of life which may not always even be rational to us?

In the explanation to the second article of the Creed, Luther concludes with: That we may be his own in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

Is our model for this day Thomas on his knees, crying out "My Lord and my God!"

What does the confession of Christ with word and deed look like among us? How will the resurrection of Jesus be evidenced by our life and words? We often define that as an evangelistic task, but is that truly the sum of it? Isn't simply going to church the Sunday after Easter a message in itself? How will that look tomorrow? What will happen with me when I am confronted with the challenges of work? When I meet my neighbor on the street? Will this Jesus actually have an impact on my life? We thought it meant living life with authenticity and conviction. It might be opening our hearts and minds to others. Do we listen first and then talk? Is that what it means to be someone who claims that Jesus is my Lord? The prayer first directs us to our life and then to our conversation. Is that order important? Does our life reflect an Easter joy throughout the week or just on Sunday?

The disciples will be back to work fishing in a few days. One does not need to follow a Francis of Assisi sort of path in which one's life is radically transformed or altered. Paul will do much of his missionary work from a tent maker's stall in the marketplace. I may look very similar to the way that I was before. Yet, Peter will jump out of the boat fully clothed and single handedly pull the boats onto the shore. Peter will indeed be given boldness. But it is a boldness which is in a relationship with real people that he knows.

Acts 5:12-20 (21-32) Because the Acts of the Apostles does not otherwise appear in the readings of the Church year, the editors of the pericope system have elected to make it the first reading in the season of Easter. These readings portray the first and often formative proclamation of the resurrection and are worthy of our close attention.

¹² Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

¹⁷ But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy ¹⁸ they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ²⁰ "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." ²¹ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. ²² But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ²³ "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside." ²⁴ Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. ²⁵ And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." ²⁶ Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

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."

Peter serves as a beautiful example of someone who does what we pray to do in the collect today. He confessed Jesus to be both Lord and Savior by his actions and conversations. Even though he acknowledged the authority of the Sanhedrin, when they summoned him, he obeyed their summons, stood before them, and he simply said that Jesus called the shots here. Like Peter, countless martyrs would make a similar confession before Roman judges and governors for the next several hundred years. Today – the soccer coach calls the shots and thus my child cannot possibly be in church this Sunday to light candles. He has a game in which he must play if he hopes to get a scholarship. Is there something wrong with that picture?

There are a number of things happening in this text which the preacher wants to keep in mind. First of all, this is part of one of Luke's big points in the book. He starts off with Jesus ascending into heaven, which seems to imply that he is up there and not here. The rest of the story,

however, suggests something very different. The disciples are doing all the things of Jesus. They perform the same miracles and they meet resistance from the same group of Jewish leaders who arrested, tried, and ultimately crucified Jesus. Jesus is in this picture, can you see him? It is a little like a “Where’s Waldo” book. When you notice his face, you will see his brown eyes twinkling at you from the pages of a text about other people.

The second thing you want to notice about this is that Luke is just a good story teller; he is obviously someone who likes stories and likes to tell them. Sometimes the stories themselves can almost overwhelm the point. The preacher wants to keep this in mind. The Bible is overwhelmingly a collection of stories and songs and things like that. The actual didactic material in the bible is relatively small in terms of percentage. I don’t think that is an accident. God knows how we are put together as human beings. We learn best from stories and so he called a story teller to write this book for us.

This story is actually supposed to be a funny story. The bad guys arrest the good guys, but while the bad guys are sleeping, an angel comes and lets the good guys out of prison. So the next day while the bad guys are looking all over the prison for the good guys, the good guys are back in the very house of the bad guys doing the very thing that makes the bad guys so angry. In the ancient world, this was classic comedic material. We do the same thing today. it is a standard motif in comedic material. Hogan’s Heroes had Colonel Klink who thought he was in charge but really the prisoners ran the camp. In this little story the prisoners are actually the ones who have the power. That was funny on TV and it was funny 2000 years ago. Comedy is a great way to say important things. How will we say this?

When they finally figure this out, the bad guys have to invite Peter and the disciples to come and address them, for fear of the people. Notice how the roles have reversed here. The people who are supposed to be afraid, are not afraid. And the ones who should inspire fear are trembling. In the ancient world this was a joke. When the folks on the bottom are seen to be the folks on top of the situation, they thought that was funny. We still do today; a common trope in our comedies is the wily hillbilly who outfoxes the educated city slicker or the child who is more wise than the adult.

The third thing worth noting here is that the preaching of the resurrection in the first part of Acts is rarely a proclamation of good news, at least to the described audience. For the reader, for us, it remains good news. Peter’s audience members are the very people who killed Jesus. The last thing they want to hear is that Jesus rose from the grave into which they had stuffed him to be rid of him. The resurrection of Jesus was bad news for them. We might just want to ask if it is ever bad news for us. If we really believed it, would it be bad news? There is an old man who lurks in all of us for whom the resurrection is very bad news. It means that he dies. He smirks when we are indifferent to the good news of resurrection because then we are not enslaved to that one who rose.

The fourth thing worth noting in here is the words of Peter in response to the Sanhedrin. “We must obey God rather than men.” This was Luther’s favorite quote out of the Bible when he was

faced with the opposition of the Pope and his emissaries in the first part of his career. We have to obey God rather than men. It of course would come back to haunt him when he was part of the Elector's desire to reform the Saxon church and he confronted the Schwermer whom Luther declared had swallowed the Holy Spirit "feathers and all." They had their own vision for reform and were not about to let the Elector's rules or Luther's invective deter them from their rather Pentecostal view of Christianity. They would kick this back into the reformer's face. This phrase is a two edged sword, use it with care.

The fifth noteworthy thing is the first one mentioned. Peter and the disciples are loved by the crowds and even defended by them because they were doing good things among the people. Luke is carefully noting that this applied to men and women. The disciples were breaking social taboos and conventions this way. The ancient world did not waste a great deal of time on women, but the disciples of Jesus did. In fact, as Luke and the Gospel writers portray him, Jesus expended a great deal of energy on women, slaves, and other folks whom the society had largely forgotten.

The sixth thing I would have notice in this long and noteworthy text is that Peter identifies himself and the rest of the apostles as witnesses to the resurrection and to Jesus. Peter is neither the prosecutor nor the judge. He is a witness to the things which he has seen. His role is simply to speak of what he has seen, not to convince, nor to make a decision regarding the validity or the efficacy of his testimony. He speaks what he sees.

It seems to have worked. If you read on a few verses into chapter six you will notice that great number of the priests, the very members of the Sadducee party which arrested him here became Christians. There is some speculation that the letter to the Hebrews was written to this group of Christians who were considering a return to the Jewish faith at some later date.

The seventh item for our consideration would be the simple boldness of Peter here. The Gospel lesson which portrays them only a few weeks earlier than these events has them cowering in the upper room for fear of these very same Jews. An amazing transformation has overcome them, and it is a transformation of the Holy Spirit to which Peter himself testifies.

What does the preacher want to say about this whole thing? There are several potential avenues of sermonic development open to us. One is clearly the witnessing motif, especially the idea that it often encounters resistance and even hostility. This is not a sign that we have failed, but indeed happened to Jesus and to the very first disciples who bore witness to Christ. We may well look like Jesus in the fact that we are scorned, laughed at, ridiculed, mocked, even arrested, and harmed for our witnessing. Will that stop us? Should that stop us? Can that stop us? The angel springs the apostles from prison, but not just that they be out of the shackles, but that they witness, it is a purposeful freedom they are given. See the discussion of the collect above, there is a Lord who bids them witness. This is not an optional activity.

The preacher might also want to develop the whole idea of the presence of Christ in this scenario. It is very interesting that when Jesus shows up the second time in the Gospel lesson for

today, no one has told him about Thomas's words, yet he seems to walk right up to Thomas and confront him about them. He was right there when Thomas doubted, he just took a few days to reveal himself.

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!

The psalmist sees the whole world responding to the name of God and his mighty deeds. The elements, the geography, the animals, everything is getting in on the praise. But the focus of the whole thing is the people of Israel who have been saved.

Too often we disconnect the salvation which God has worked from the creation in which we live. When Jesus died and rose again, he did so not only for the soul, but for the whole person, for the whole of creation.

Revelation 1:4-18

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

⁹ I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive

forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹ Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

We don't often remember that Revelation starts off as a letter to seven churches, but here it is in the spot for an epistle, sounding like a letter.

Of course what really interests us here is his description of his encounter with Jesus. But don't overlook the fact that John writes this from Patmos "on account of the word of God." He is enduring a form of persecution as he writes. Like the disciples before the Sanhedrin, some 60 years later, he is still preaching, despite the resistance of all those who have tried to stop him.

He describes the call to write the letter to the seven Churches which occupy cities in the area of Ephesus. He turns and sees the one speaking to him and we get a really interesting picture of Jesus. It is clearly Jesus because he says at the end, "I died and I am alive forevermore, I have the keys of death and Hades."

He is like a son of man, probably here simply a reference to his humanity. He is clothed in a robe and has a golden sash around his chest. In the roman era, these sashes were badges of office. You can liken this to the president of Mexico who wears a sash as the sign that he is president. A golden sash would be reserved for the highest office, an imperial office or higher in this case.

His hair is white, like wool, like snow. This whiteness in the culture would have denoted purity and wisdom. His eyes flash like fire. The first century people, like artists today, see the eyes as a window the soul, a view into the intelligence of the person. To have eyes that flash like fire suggests intelligence.

So far the picture is of a person we might have seen on the street, albeit a little odd. Now things start to get surrealistically strange. His feet are like burnished bronze. I suppose a well-tanned individual might look like this, but I get the impression John means feet that are really like burnished bronze, metallic. For the audience, I believe this would have suggested an almost immovable strength or solidity. We have just moved beyond the realm of what might be called "normal experience" and gotten into the tricky realm of allegory or literary description.

His voice is like the roar of many waters. If you have every stood at the foot of a large waterfall, you know the sound John is talking about. It deafens, it fills the audible spectrum and is almost a physical weight itself. This is not achievable by a human voice. But John is not describing a normal voice, he means to say that Jesus speaks with power, his words have strength which no normal human voice has.

In his hands he holds seven stars, not the little cut out stars we might hang on our Christmas tree, but seven of the real thing. This is way beyond what a human can do. The seven stars will be explained later, they are related to the seven churches, and they are the angels which are sent to the seven churches. Are they angelic beings or are they the messengers (that is what angel

really means) which might indicate the pastors. Remember these seven churches are enduring persecution, the first person the persecutors usually single out is the leader, perhaps John is telling them that their pastors, likely already arrested, are stars in Jesus hands. That would be a welcome message for a group whose preacher has been hauled off by the authorities.

Out of his mouth comes a sharp two edged sword. That's not something you see every day, but again, John is not talking as much about what Jesus looks like as he is talking about the power and the characteristic of the words that come out of his mouth. It is sharp, it cuts both ways, it is dangerous and it is very useful.

His face is like the blazing sun. One just about cannot look at that. In fact John will fall down at his feet like a dead man. Jesus face is likened to the sun at full strength. The sun, like Jesus' face, is bright and necessary, but to look at it too long is to risk blindness for these sin weakened eyes. If you have ever read the Voyage of the Dawn Treader by C. S. Lewis you know how he plays with that at the end of the book.

Jesus bids John stand, identifying himself as the beginning and the end, the one who died and is alive, Jesus. We often are asked what we will look like after we rise from the dead and the resurrected Jesus is often the picture we give to people. I would not give them this picture to answer that question.

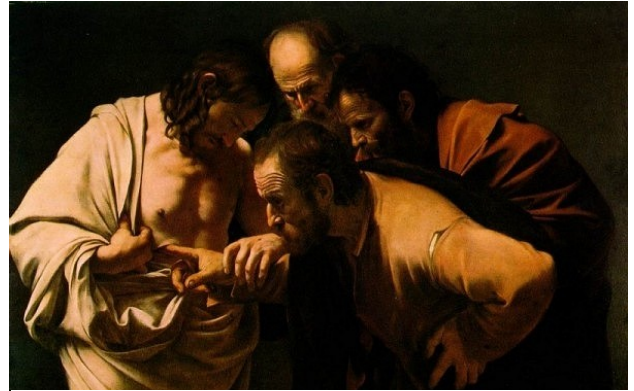
The appearance of this Jesus is a message in himself, a message of powerful comfort to a persecuted people. They likely would have been asking if Christ was weak, did not see their problems, was he somehow displaced or ineffective in their defense? John has, in these opening words of his book, just addressed all those sorts of questions. What questions are the people to whom we preach asking today? What does this say to us?

1. Jesus has the keys of Death and Hades – that sounds pretty important, and at least gives us hope. They presumably used to be in Satan's hands and that was not good. Jesus has wrested control of these things from our enemy.
2. This text asserts the omniscience and omnipotence of Christ – but also holding the seven stars which are the angels of the seven churches, not distant from his suffering people.
3. Does this text simply describe Jesus as he is now, in his glory? What does that do for us? Jesus has a rather strange description above. But does it in fact make more sense than the effeminate Jesus who adorns too much of our Sunday School literature.
4. John fell on his face, as one who is dead. Is this what it means to be in the presence of Christ? Is it an indictment of all of us who have glanced at our watches during church wondering when this will be over?

John 20:19-31 I am including the last verse of the prior pericope. Is Thomas the only doubter here?

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.”



by Caravaggio 1602

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.”



by Peter Paul Rubens c. 1613



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.

Every semester of my NT class, we start with this story and the story Jesus healing the blind man in chapter 9. I love this section of Scripture and think that it is one of the keys to reading the whole New Testament witness to Christ.

The story is quite accessible and does not really need a great deal of explanation. The disciples are in the upper room, afraid. The doors are locked for fear of the Jews and suddenly Jesus is there. The implication is that he did not need to open any of the doors, he does not knock, nor does he crawl through a window or the skylight. He is suddenly there. Was he there the whole time?



by Henrick der Bruggen 1622

He speaks a word of peace to them, shows them his wounds, they rejoice and he speaks peace to them again. He bestows the Holy Spirit in what serves as a sort of mini-Pentecost in John's Gospel and then he sends them out into the world to be witnesses and forgivers of sins.

Their first prospective convert is one of their own members. Isn't that interesting? They don't wait for Jesus to show up, but because they are now filled with his Spirit, they literally are the presence of Christ. They find Thomas and share the news. He does not believe, asserting that he needs to touch Jesus hands and side before he will believe.

A week later the scene repeats only this time Thomas is there. Jesus appears. He does not wait for them to explain Thomas or recount his words, but he immediately walks up to Thomas and confronts him for his unbelief, citing the very words he spoke to his fellow disciples. His words to Thomas are critically important. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Those people, of course are the readers – we are those blessed people! We have encountered Christ in the people who have spoken to us with his Spirit. Jesus has called us blessed in a way that Thomas is not blessed. We have seen him and believed.



bronze by Verrocchio 1467-83

As Peter praised the people in his first letter, even though they have not seen him, they believe in him and are being saved.

The preacher has a particularly rich set of opportunities here.

1. *The Peace of God. Jesus offers peace twice in the first scene and in the middle of that peace there are two important things: the wounds of Christ and the disciples' joy. One could preach a marvelous sermon simply on the peace of God and the fact that at the center of God's peace lie the wounds of Christ and the joy of Christians.*
2. *They received the Holy Spirit. John does not have a Pentecost event, and this already is anticipating the feast which comes in just short of two months. Jesus gives them his most precious gift, the gift that he gives to us as well in our baptism when he breaths on us.*
3. *"If you forgive, it is forgiven." The mission of the disciples – they are empowered, authorized to be the forgivers of sins. The Spirit empowers this; the Word who is in the Flesh authorizes it. One does not have higher authority or greater power. We can face down any sin, forgive it and know that we speak with the full faith and credit of heaven itself. The preacher may also want to address the other side of this equation. If our congregation is filled this Sunday with the regulars and the faithful, it might be time to address this question. When do we not forgive? If my brother refuses to forgive me, am I condemned? Might be time for Phil's plumbing metaphor of the Gospel. There is a shut-off valve to forgiveness, but it is between me and God, not between me and the guy next to me. I tend to see this as an act of the Church and not an act of the individual, in much the same way that my forgiveness spoken is not a private license, but a promise to speak on the behalf of God in the community. I am not sure that one man can deny me forgiveness; that is God's, but the community may speak forcefully to me.*

This whole notion is predicated upon the reality that Jesus died for all the sins. The retention of a sin is not a statement that the sins are not forgiven, but it is the attitude of the sinner which prevents the sin from being forgiven. It is not the magnitude of the sin or the sinner which prevents the sin from being forgiven, but the refusal of the forgiveness. The impenitent does not want to be forgiven, because forgiveness implies something is wrong and he/she cannot admit that what was done was a problem.

The other way to take this is that Jesus is saying that if they don't forgive the sins, they won't be forgiven, in other words, they are the only ones to whom this is entrusted. If we are not out there forgiving, who else will do it?

4. *The Presence of Christ – it is pretty clear that Jesus is with these guys the whole time. It is only on a couple of occasions he actually shows up for their eyes to see, but he is there the whole time. He already knows what Thomas said, he doesn't need the doors to open in order for him to get into the room. He is there the whole time. In his outpoured Spirit he is present wherever a Christian finds him or herself.*
5. *Faith – Thomas does not really doubt their word, but he disbelieves them. He needs proof. What do we need to believe this resurrection story? What is the essence of our faith? Jesus says that we are more blessed than Thomas who touches Jesus with his*

hands. What does that mean? What does that entail? Jesus blesses the people who have not seen and yet believed, that would be us. Jesus is speaking well of us today.

- 6. The purpose of the Gospel. In the final two verses, John seems to suggest that this book is not written that you may have knowledge but that you may believe. Greek does not use the word “believe,” but has a verbal form of faith. John writes that you “faith” in Jesus. In fact, he tells you that there are lots of miracles he has left out of this text. These are here so you may “faith.”*

What will we preach? I will make some suggestions here but we can surely develop another idea.

What is faith? Thomas touches/sees Jesus, but it is then that his eyes are really opened. We imagine that a doubting, skeptical mind is open and has its eyes wide open. But the truth is that Thomas for all his wide open mind and eyes was also blind to something that Jesus himself had said. Jesus had said that he would rise from the dead, but Thomas just could not see it. John has played with this whole metaphor of “seeing” in John 9. Faith is the relationship in which we trust God wholly. He is the savior, the one who raises the dead. Faith sees in him the solution to every one of our deepest problems, including death, including sin, and our ancient foe.

Law and Gospel

1. Resurrection is hard to believe – I have been to quite a few cemeteries and I find that the people who have been laid to rest there are stubbornly dead. It simply defies my human imagination that people would rise from the dead. But Jesus gives the Holy Spirit, so that without touching, without seeing the dead raised, I can “faith” that God will raise me and all believers in Christ.
2. The world does not seem all that different to me now that Jesus has been raised. The same issues continue to plague us, if anything, they are getting worse. It looks as though Jesus and the Christian movement he has launched have been miserable failures. Christians die at the same alarming rate as everyone else. Our words are largely ignored by the world around us unless we make them more exciting and pander to the itching ears of this generation. But Jesus empowers our words of forgiveness, and those words are the words of the one who has the white hair, flashing eyes, bronze feet, stars in hand, and sword coming out of his mouth. He speaks with the power of Niagara Falls.
3. I often seem so alone or part of such a small band of God’s people. Like disciples huddled for fear in an upper room, we seem to be defensive and afraid, on the retreat from a dominant culture which does not hate us but which ignores and that is much worse. But Jesus shows up in the midst of his disciples. He was right there when they sought Thomas out and he was there again when Thomas came to faith. Jesus has not left us but is right here.
4. We don’t seem to be winning. Yes, it was great to have so many folks in church last Sunday, but where are they today? Our pews may seem distressingly empty today. But

this is in God's hands. The disciples arrested in Acts looked like losers but God turned that situation on its head. The disciples huddled in fear on the first Easter became bold preachers of the Gospel. The Jesus John sees holds stars in his hands.

5. There is so much I don't know. Jesus seems to be living in another world. I don't know the way to heaven, I don't know what I am supposed to do, I don't know how this resurrection thing works, I don't know so much. Jesus comes and puts his hands on my head and calls me his own. There is much I don't know and he offers me his love and care that I may trust him.

Sermon Ideas

1. His Face Shines like the Sun (Revelation – That the Holy Spirit would keep the gaze of the hearer on the risen, loving, and powerful Jesus)

We often are given to see Jesus in his humility and suffering. And it is well that we are given that look. For Jesus saved us by laying aside his strength, glory, honor, and power to suffer and die for us. But having laid it aside, he took it up again when he had finished that course of our salvation. Ascended into heaven he sits at God's right hand today. And it is a very good thing that he does. For God's right hand is not a place, it is the seat of cosmic power.

Today John has a vision of Jesus. The preacher will want to unpack that vision for his hearer today, but don't just explain it, connect it to the lives your people are living right now.

Don't try to draw this Jesus on a board or look for an image of this Jesus on the internet. Visualized this is frightening and not at all what John has in mind for this. He wants to comfort his hearer by telling him some things about the Jesus who is caring for them right now. He has spoken to John to send them this document because he cares for them. Don't lose sight of that care.

One could work off the ending to our collects in which we pray to the Jesus who "lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit..." When we pray that prayer week after week, this is the Jesus to whom we are addressing that prayer. This is the one who listens to those prayers. John wants us to know that guy, to believe that he can hear those prayers and answer them with mighty deeds, wisdom, care, and compassion.

- a. ¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, - Here is the statement of Jesus' care. But you have to look at the end of the chapter to get it. These seven lampstands are the seven churches to which John is writing. They are being persecuted and feeling rather lost and abandoned. But John wants them to see that Jesus is right there in the middle of them. This letter is

not written from a Jesus who is far away, but the Jesus who is right there with them. Keep this in mind for all that follows.

- b. clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. –The Sash is symbol of his authority. In the ancient world this is what people of power and authority wore. Currently, you might just consider the president of Mexico whose official garb involves a sash. It is a little like a crown in that regard. Jesus authority is important for us too. God the Father has vested all the decisions into his perforated hands. He is the judge and the one who forgives us today.
- c. ¹⁴The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. – Most commentators see this white hair to be an indication of Jesus' wisdom. He doesn't look like the Sunday School pictures I have of Jesus. That is the point. The picture most of us have in our mind's eye is the humble Jesus of Galilee. John is not painting the picture of Jesus who has laid aside his glory. This is Jesus in his glory. He radiates wisdom. The one who holds the power and authority is wise.
- d. His eyes were like a flame of fire, - the eyes are usually a sign of intelligence. Jesus knows all. He is not oblivious to our hurt or our suffering. He does not need to be informed by our prayers and our failures to pray have not deprived him of important information. This knowledge of Jesus of himself is not good news, but when the one who cares for you knows all, that changes.
- e. ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, - Solid feet. You are not about to tip over a guy who has bronze feet. This Jesus walks with very loud footsteps. The picture here is that the Jesus who is watching out for you is powerful and strong.
- f. and his voice was like the roar of many waters. - Jesus' words have power. He spoke creation into being and he still holds that power.
- g. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, -Read a few verses later and he explains what these stars are. They are the messengers/angels who serve the people in the seven churches. I think these are the pastors.
- h. from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, - Notice that the word of Jesus comes right after this description of the seven stars. Is he talking about our sermons here?
- i. and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. – Have you ever stood out on a sunny day – perhaps in Las Vegas or Phoenix or Houston? Jesus risen and glorified is intense.
- j. ¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. – John's

reaction to Jesus is perfectly normal, but his words to John and to us are pure Gospel. Don't be afraid, I have died and risen, I have the keys which open the grave and hell and I am alive forever more. This Jesus is standing right in your midst today.

2. Peace be with you (That the hearer would believe that in Christ God has given them the peace that passes all human understanding, at its center will be the very wounds of Christ and my joy.)

This is a sermon which gives the congregation weary from the celebration of Easter a bit of a respite and rest. They have just come through the emotionally exhausting observances of Holy Week, they have journeyed to the upper room, the garden, the trial in the palaces of the powerful and warmed themselves at the fire with Peter. They have trudged up Calvary's mournful mountain, and wept as they laid him in the tomb. Their sorrow has been turned to Easter Joy as they have heard the women's proclamation once more. It has been an exhausting week.

Today we want to focus simply on the good of what God has wrought here. Twice Christ says "Peace" to his disciples, to us. And in the middle of that peace we find the wounds of Christ and the disciples' joy.

We look for peace often in all the wrong places. We seek it in proper rules and the following of rules, we look for peace in prosperity and the things of this world. But they always disappoint us. There is no peace in psychotherapy, in drugs, in any place other than the peace which is centered on the wounds of Christ. This past week, we have gotten a shot of real and lasting peace. It was not built on us getting it right, in fact it was predicated on the fact that God has recognized that we are absolute failures with it comes to running the human race. We have fallen, we are helpless, so he has come to run that race, pick us up and carry us across that finish line. It is no longer on my shoulders, there is some of that peace.

But there is also a peace which now exists between me and my neighbor. Christ empowers me to forgive. I don't have to be a bean counting, scale balancer any more. I can forgive the hurts of my neighbor and the living resurrected Christ will back up my words and makes the forgiveness I speak into the real and true righteousness I describe when I say that someone is forgiven. That is another peace which surrounds the wounds of Christ.

And all this gives me joy. Today is a day simply to revel in the peace and to find in it the simple joy which Christians have and which the world cannot take away, for this joy comes from Christ, his Word, his gift, his wounds, his life, his death, his resurrection, and the world simply cannot touch those things.

3. We must obey God rather than men, rather than men. (That the hearer would hear and heed the resurrection call to a radical obedience to Christ – raised from the dead he has become Lord of all.)

This is the sermon for the congregation which has been energized for mission and ministry by the Easter celebration. It is our Lord who has been raised from that grave, the Lord whose presence we enjoy today, the Lord whose voice has called us back to this place on the Sunday after Easter and whom we have obeyed.

The disciples today are our model and our inspiration. This is not easy for them, and it will not always be easy for us either. Thomas finds his mind gets in the way, his cold and reasoned logic does not admit that men rise from the dead. He needs proof. But Christ leads him to make the confession – My Lord and My God!

A short while later the book of Acts relates the story of these same disciples boldly proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. The world would conform them and their witness to its own ends. It imprisons them, and they go back to preach to some more. And when confronted by the censure of the Priests, the disciples boldly proclaim that they must obey God rather than men.

But who would conform us today? The world would still like to silence us, but for the most part it achieves that through simply ignoring us. We face no Sanhedrin today, at least not an overt one, but perhaps an internal one. The world tells me that I am in charge, and I need to be taking care of me, just as you need to take care of you. But slip the “n” of the end of Peter’s little speech and we might find today’s proclamation. I must obey God rather than me.

Now this is not some slavish obedience, as if God would react to it and give me something. This past Holy Week has been the loud proclamation that God has given his only son for the salvation of the whole world. It is not for sale, it cannot be bought, it is given, and has already been given. To think that we would buy this from God is insulting and even blasphemous.

This obedience is the obedience of faith, the obedience which flows out of the fact that God has already redeemed me from slavery to sin and death and set me free. What will I do with that freedom as I serve this resurrected Lord? What will the world see me doing and being and saying. We prayed in the collect today that we would with word and deed proclaim the lordship and deity of Christ. How will that look today?

We have already said something simply by showing up here today. The world might come to an Easter service, after all there was a free breakfast. But this week the one’s conformed to the world find themselves in bed or out and about with other things they deem more important. You are here.

But it is more than Sunday mornings that Christ has redeemed, it is the whole of life. Every act becomes an opportunity for my life to give that evidence of Christ and his resurrection. My honesty is not in response to some fear that I might get caught in a lie, but it is the cheerful obedience rendered to Christ my King. I will be honest even when my lie won't be caught. Do you see how that changes it?

This sermon seeks to recast the whole of the Christian life in light of the resurrection.

4. Whose sins you forgive...whose sins you retain (That the hearer would be empowered by the Spirit and authorized by the living Lord Jesus Christ to speak His forgiveness to this world.)

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.

Jesus said that, what does it mean? He speaks to us. What does this mean for us today. The resurrection of Christ has fundamentally changed the human relationships I have. I live in a kingdom in which forgiveness is possible, real.

The first part of this equation is really the pleasant part of ministry. We are given to speak words of love and forgiveness to the world in which we live, good news. It is always fun to share good news; although, quite often that news is shared in difficult circumstances. Like the women who ran from the tomb, we are eager. To tell a person that their sins are forgiven, that the burden they feel so terribly has been born by Christ and is no longer on their shoulders is a beautiful thing. Tell a story about doing that. The preacher will want to make it as real as possible.

The second part of this equation may take a little more effort on our part, as a preacher. This is a difficult thing. God seems to be opening to the door to some really hard things. What if I have offended someone and they refuse to forgive me? Is my salvation in doubt? What if I am finding it very difficult to forgive someone who has hurt me terribly? Is God going to damn that person because I am weak or just lousy at forgiving?

The retention of a sin is a serious thing. It is a real thing. But before we can really either forgive or retain a sin, we have admit that sin is real. Our world is often blithely unaware or in serious denial about the reality of sin. It imagines that sin is simply a lack of education, a chemical imbalance in the brain, a problem, but not serious problem. This is toxic to forgiveness. There is nothing then to forgive.

The grossly impenitent do not need us to be mealy mouthed and accommodating. They need the sharp two edged sword that cuts both ways. They really don't care that we have forgiven them or God has forgiven them. They need to know that what they have done is wrong, that it is a real problem, that there is a real hurt here, relationship has been broken.

The day we don't forgive a sin will be a stomach churning sort of day, most likely. It is not something that we want to do alone, or without prayer and much contemplation. The

trigger for forgiveness is easy, if the person says, “I’m sorry.” We can blurt out, “I forgive.” And we have a marvelous promise that God joins us in that word. But this second half of the equation, the bit about not forgiving, this is a difficult day. What can we say about that?

- a. The one who has hurt you, has also broken relationship with God. If we don’t bear witness to that fact, we are no friend. When David is confronted by the prophet for his murder of Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba, David admits to sinning against God. Our horizontal actions against other people, wreak havoc in the vertical relationship to God. We cannot remain in relationship with God when we are out of relationship with others.
- b. The refusal to forgive is not an act of anger or hatred or spite. It is an act of love. If it comes from those negative places, I cannot say that God will honor such an unspiritual act. He will find a way to forgive around my weakness. God’s will, his very nature, is always to draw people toward himself, not to push away. This text does not empower you to be the judge.
- c. But there are times when people do need to hear, and even be crushed by the law, the condemnation of God, spoken through his people. There is a time to say that sin has caused a rupture with God that needs to be healed. If we cannot say it, it is a failure of belief on our part. Silence is simply acquiescing to the culture which says that this whole religious thing is just not important. This relationship with God is important, vitally important. Silence stands in the way of restoration and becomes a sin for us.
- d. The beauty of Jesus’ promise to us is that he has to walk into that room with us. He backs us up, no matter what we are there to say, when we say it in his love. In fact, Jesus is in that difficult place long before we get there.
- e. God will prepare their hearts to hear us.

Put some practical legs on this. What is forgiveness?

1. It is not saying that we like the other person. Forgiveness is simply stating that Jesus died for this problem. When I forgive someone I am not saying that I have some supernatural ability, I am saying that Jesus’ death on the cross has paid its price. I will honor that payment, that blood he shed. The score is settled.
2. Forgiveness is not forgetting – “forgive and forget” is not in the Bible, it is in Shakespeare. I am called upon to remember it “red” covered in the blood of Jesus. That means that if I bring it back up, if I bear a grudge, if I cast it back into the teeth of the other in a fit of rage or pique, I have a problem. It may be that I am able to get over a past hurt, but it is not required of me.

3. Forgiveness is not becoming best friends with the other person or never taking this into account. If the person steals from me, forgiving him does mean I hire him to be my accountant. If they are a child abuser I don't hire them to work in the church daycare.
4. Forgiveness does not remove temporal consequences. I can forgive the person and they can still go to jail. That does not mean they are not forgiven. Just because we forgive a girl who has gotten pregnant doesn't mean the baby goes away. At least it should not.
5. Forgiveness unleashes the blessings of God. The baby mentioned above becomes a great blessing to her. Forgiveness often restores relationships to be stronger than they were before the sin. Understanding the sin and the sinner, which most of us practice instead of forgiveness, simply makes us both into miserable sinners. Forgiveness makes us whole again. I have seen friendships in which forgiveness is practiced endure terrible sin and be much stronger.
6. Forgiveness takes practice. Don't wait for the whopper sin – start with the little stuff which we often just let roll off our backs or which we ignore. If you wait for the big one, you will find that the toolbox is empty. Forgiveness takes practice, lots of practice. You will initially feel somewhat hypocritical in forgiving, but stick with it. It will come naturally soon.