

P Christ is risen!
C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every year on the Sunday after Easter our appointed Gospel text is a continuation of the appointed Easter Sunday text. Easter morning has moved to Easter evening and we have this wonderful story of Jesus encountering his frightened but very human disciples closed up in a room. But please notice in this text that Jesus shows up not just once, but a week later Jesus shows up again. The disciples are closed in a room, frightened of all those, who without a doubt, stand in opposition to Jesus. And in these encounters there seems to be much attention paid to one particular disciple by name of Thomas.

The attention is because of the reaction of Thomas, which labels him, “Doubting-Thomas”. Thomas, and only Thomas, of all the disciples in all four of the Gospels, is singled out for his doubt. Peter is NOT known as the denier, nor is Judas known as the betrayer but we label Thomas with our assumptions about him. This has been, in my opinion, unfair to Thomas because of this particular text. But there is so much more than doubt that we can learn from Thomas. Instead of only seeing Thomas’ moment of doubt, may we look past that doubt and see God working in and through that doubt. Moving past the doubt, may we then see the glory of God’s mercy given to each of us in the new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A few weeks back, on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, we heard that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. In that rather lengthy Gospel lesson, we heard a very ambiguous Jesus saying that the illness of Lazarus does not lead to death, rather his illness leads to God’s glory and that Lazarus has simply fallen asleep. Then after that, we heard in this same Gospel lesson that Jesus tells the disciples very plainly and very bluntly:

¹⁴ ...“Lazarus is dead.” ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” (John 11:14b-15)

Earlier in this Gospel, Jesus wanted to return to Judea to visit his friend Lazarus, who was very ill...even though, the opponents of Jesus had just tried to stone Jesus. So, the disciples try to discourage Jesus from making that dangerous trip to Lazarus. But Jesus was determined to go, and so it was Thomas who...despite the risk of his own life, spoke up and said:

“Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (John 11:16b)

And then of course God’s glory is revealed When Lazarus is raised up from death. But before this even happens, Thomas shows NOT doubt, rather he shows very confidently his faith in that glory in his desire, to risk even death, to see that glory may be revealed.

In light of this stunning confession of discipleship from Thomas I am reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s comments on the cost of discipleship that he states begins with the cross of Christ that is laid on every Christian:

The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter

with Jesus Christ. Those who enter into discipleship enter into Jesus' death. They turn their living into dying: such has been the case from the very beginning. (*which I just pointed out in Thomas*) The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death.¹

Once again we hear this movement from the self, or as Bonhoeffer says, that faith, or the call, summons us from our attachments of this world. I spoke of this when I quoted Hans Urs von Balthasar who claims, "Faith is a movement of the entire person away from (the) self, through the gift of grace...."² Thomas reveals this by moving from the self in his willingness to go and die with Lazarus so that God's glory may be revealed. But, unfortunately today within our Gospel text, the old myths of unsubstantiated teaching call the very disciple who is willing to go and die to reveal God's glory, "Doubting Thomas." Which only proves what Bonhoeffer also said about judgment:

"Judging others makes us blind.... By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are."³

In this "title" or rather, this assumption about Thomas we blind ourselves to our own doubt. Moreover, we blind ourselves to God's glory revealed in that doubt when we choose to judge Thomas simply as a doubter and ignore our own doubt because we are afraid of what will be said about ourselves. This title, "doubt" puts Thomas and even doubt itself in a bad light and our assumptions tell us that doubt is bad or that doubt abolishes the righteousness we have through the very grace we are given through our faith. But we all experience doubt and yet we are still here today gathered into this room. But no matter how dark and how loud the voice of apprehension can be, we are not alone in our doubt. I think of the words of St. Luke when he writes of the doubts of Jesus:

⁴¹ Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴² 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' [⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴ In his anguish he prayed more earnestly...(Luke 22:41-44).

Nonetheless, in the radiant glory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we gather and celebrate this day, I confess that over the years I have had my doubts about this call to serve God and to speak of God as a called preacher. In my doubt I am also reminded like Jesus that it is NOT my will but God's will. It is God's will that I proclaim from this broken hill.

I love this image of the pulpit as a broken hill from a song from Lenard Cohen. Cohen tells it this way in the lyrics of his song, "If It Be Your Will":

If it be your will
That I speak no more
And my voice be still

¹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Discipleship*. Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Martin Kuske† and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis, Fortress Press paperback edition: 2003. Chapter Two, The Call To Discipleship, page 87, par 81.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *In the Fulness of Faith, On the Centrality of the Distinctively Catholic*. This passage is taken from *For All the Saints, A Prayer Book For and By the Church, Vol. 1* in the appointed readings for "Tuesday of Holy Week" page 954. Parenthetical words are changed from masculine to the general.

³ *Ibid.* Page 172

As it was before
I will speak no more
I shall abide until
I am spoken for
If it be your will
If it be your will
That a voice be true
From this broken hill
I will sing to you
From this broken hill
All your praises they shall ring
If it be your will
To let me sing⁴

Cohen's sentiment in this song seems to reflect the very words of Christ, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' As Lutherans we ought to know that doubt does not abolish the righteousness we have through the very grace we are given through our faith. Within the documents that define our Lutheran faith we confess that:

We believe, teach, and confess that in spite of the fact that until death a great deal of weakness and frailty still cling to those who believe in Christ and are truly reborn, they should not doubt their righteousness, which is reckoned to them through faith, nor the salvation of their souls, but they should regard it as certain that they have a gracious God for Christ's sake, on the basis of the promise and the Word of the holy gospel.⁵

When we focus our attention on the apprehension of Thomas we see that a great deal of weakness and frailty still cling to not only Thomas, but to all the others holed up in the room and each of us who are gathered in this room. But when we move from that doubt, that weakness, and our human frailty we see, or we ought to see that Jesus knows this and has known this about all of us because he returns to the very people who hide, who deny, who betray, and who abandon and even doubt and comes to us all and says, "Peace be with you." Jesus returns not once, but twice and confronts Thomas in his doubt and says,

"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt 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 come to believe."

We have NOT physically seen our Lord and our God but we have come to believe through Word and Sacrament. This is for each of us the "first fruits of the Spirit." Yes we will continue in our weakness, our human frailty, our doubt, and our sin but we are not alone...Jesus has assured us of this when he said:

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:20b)

⁴ "If It Be Your Will" Leonard Cohen, Copyright 1984, Sony Music Entertainment (Canada), *Leonard Cohen, Various Positions*, album track #9 side 2.

⁵ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000. Article III: Concerning the Righteousness of Faith before God The Formula of Concord: Epitome, art. iii, par. 9 pg. 496

Our weakness, our human frailty, our doubt, and our sin is our human struggle and battle of the flesh against the Spirit and this continues in us all. But these things are the great differences among Christians—one is weak, another strong in the Spirit—but within each Christian, who is at one moment resolute in the Spirit and at another fearful and afraid, at one moment ardent in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another cold, weak, and doubtful, we are forgiven and we are loved by God.⁶

Today once again Jesus Christ breaks through our barriers and our humanness and comes among us again in our many and various rooms of apprehension, weakness, and fear and says to us all, "Peace be with you." In this we see that through God's great mercy, God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us all. And as we gather in this room, once again, Jesus offers his body to us just as he did for Thomas by saying go ahead touch me if you must to help you in your unbelief or your lack of faith...touch my body so that I may strengthen your faith so that you may touch grace and salvation and be that same grace and salvation for others.

Jesus Christ in this moment in our worship right now, is once again offering himself to us by saying to us, this is my body, given for you, this is my blood shed for you, do not doubt but believe and placed into our very hands is the body and blood of grace and salvation. We can respond in that moment similar to the church's great confession: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28) by simply saying, amen which is another way of saying; "It is so."

This is God's will for each of us, that from this broken hill all our praises to God shall ring when we sing, Christ is risen, He has risen indeed, alleluia.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶ Ibid. Page 557, par 68.