

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.

From Revelation today we here this:

from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. 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. (Rev. 1:5a, 7-8)

This passage seems to beg the question, is John telling us about the coming of the Kingdom of God? Is this what it will look like? Or, do we even know what the Kingdom of God is? What is the Kingdom of God or, where do we see or experience the Kingdom of God?

The Kingdom of God is not mentioned outright in our appointed lessons for today. While this lesson from Revelation may seem to direct us to see the One who is and who was and who is to come as the coming Kingdom of God, the Gospel on the other hand, shows us that the Kingdom of God is much nearer than we might think.

From this appointed Gospel lesson from John, we have Jesus appearing to His followers who are gathered together in the locked room...just as we gather today in this "locked" room. Into this very room, Jesus enters within this proclaimed Word, and we learn of the blessing for each of us this very day in what Jesus is teaching us. St. John writes:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:29b-31)

Before us today is the written and proclaimed word, our only source of faith, telling us of Jesus Christ, and this is the Word we have come to believe. We believe...and because we have faith and believe we live in the assurance of new life. And we twist this notion of "new life" happening in a place called the Kingdom of God that we envision far beyond here.

There are a couple of things within our Gospel lesson today that seem to get contextualized in our understanding of this passage and become very misunderstood. From the start, we hear that, where the followers of Jesus met, the doors are locked because of the "fear of the Jews." Now this term "Jews" in the Gospel of John could also mean a "non-believer" and not a "Jew" of the Jewish faith. We hear that it is also evening. In the Gospel of John darkness equates to unbelief and light is belief. So that evening the followers were in a locked room for fear of Jews, or we could say the followers were locked away out of fear of the unbelief that surrounded them. Nonetheless, despite the unbelief and the locked doors Jesus appears to the gathering...not once, but twice. Jesus comes to the gathering and says, "Peace be with you" and then he shows them his hands and his side, *then* they recognize him. They all, including Thomas, come to recognized

Jesus because he shows them all his wounds. Would they know Him if he did not do this? Thomas is the one who openly doubts but would they all have doubted if Jesus said nothing or showed them nothing?

Jesus identifies himself by His wounds, not his gleaming or dazzling white clothes, not by performing some miracle or healing, but through his wounds...wounds that are signs of His glory through suffering...and here sits this group of fearful followers safe within their own fear and doubt, safe from the disbelief of the world, sitting behind closed or locked doors. And look closely at this passage, even after Jesus appears and reveals who he is to them, we hear nothing about this group of followers leaving the room or what happened to them if they did leave the room. It seems that these followers, along with their faith are locked up safely in this room, safe from what lies outside of the locked doors and safe from those beyond the walls who they see as a threat...or perhaps a threat to their faith?

Looking at this scene within this passage, from our perspective today, the question comes up, how could they NOT know it was Jesus? But this is how they end up in a locked room to begin with, because they don't know Jesus...rather, they don't have faith in Jesus. Look at it from our context today...we all claim to believe or "to know" Jesus, but how often do we keep our belief, our faith locked in the rooms within ourselves...in other words, how does our faith come to life beyond the doors of this place? Does our faith keep us safe in this room that not only keep non-believers out, but obviously keeps belief in? Does our faith stay safely locked in this room we call St. Paul Lutheran Church with the intent that our dazzling unscathed faith will return us to the Kingdom of God safe and secure? What is the Kingdom of God? And as we sit safely in our various locked rooms, are we really a witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ that says to just us in this room and no one else, Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!

I began today just as I began our Tuesday morning Bible Study this past week by asking, what is the Kingdom of God? Our Gospel tells us of the Kingdom of God...but that kingdom is not in a locked room with likeminded followers of Jesus Christ. At the close of today's Gospel, we hear that through believing we may have life in his name, (John 20:31). Luke reminds us today in our first lesson that we are witnesses to these things, because of the Holy Spirit that God has given to us, (Acts 5:32). Are we really living our faith, rather do we have life as a Christian follower of Jesus if our faith is kept safe within ourselves or locked safely in this room, this very sanctuary?

Through our faith we are told that we are witnesses, but are we witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ if we do nothing and keep our faith safely locked up in our hearts so that no one can challenge it or refute it? From the collect appointed for the Second Sunday of Easter in the Book of Common Prayer, we pray this:

Grant that all who have been (*baptized*) into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith...¹

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*. According to the use of The Episcopal Church. The Hymnal Corporation and The Seabury Press, 1997. The Collects: Traditional, Second Sunday of Easter, pages 172-173. I used the word "baptized" instead of "reborn" to avoid confusion with the contemporary understanding or "reborn" as a term used for accepting Jesus Christ as a personal savior. I fervently disavow our acceptance of the very presence of God. God has accepted us all and has made that very clear through the life, death, and resurrection of God's only Son Jesus Christ.

Through the faith poured into us through the Holy Spirit, we are all witnesses to the life, death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ who is God's only Son. A witness is not just someone who sees or experiences, a witness also confirms with open profession with one's words or actions...not in a locked room, but out there where our faith will be bruised or wounded by questions, challenges, and even doubt.

I started thinking about this question, what is the Kingdom of God while reading a couple of passages from my daily devotions this past week. From the Acts of the Apostles, Luke writes:

^{3:1} One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

² And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴ Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, '*I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.*' (Acts 3:1-6, vs. 6, italicized to emphasize my point)

Peter makes known to the lame man the Kingdom of God when he *says*: 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Peter shows him his faith, he shows the lame man grace and he walks.

I also read from the prophet Ezekiel and heard this very same thing being said in the valley of dry bones:

⁴ Then [the Lord] said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and *say to them*: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. (Ezekiel 37:4)

After the bones come to life, the Lord tells Ezekiel that they are the house of Israel, God's covenant people whose hope had been dried up and lost, but when the dry bones hear the word of the Lord, there is new life. What this says to us today is that "new life" is a new way or a different way of living the life we have all been blessed with right now, and not living life confined to a room behind closed or locked doors. Our faith does not just open locked doors for us to get out, but for others to come in and join us.

What I am pointing out within these two passages from the Acts of the Apostles' and Ezekiel is NOT the miracle of life and healing, but I am attempting to direct us to see something that is much more temporal and available or accessible for us here today as we go from this place...this gathering that is the Body of Christ. I want us to recognize that the Kingdom of God is not some celestial mansion in the cosmos. In other words, the Kingdom of God is not in the clouds, it is here with us and within us.

When we leave this locked room, the Kingdom of God is revealed to others through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us all through the Sacrament of our very own Baptism. Remember that in the waters of our Baptism we are made children of God...children a fallen humanity who have been marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit. We have all through Baptism, received the Holy Spirit just as the disciples have in our Gospel today. So just as the

very Son of God reminds us today in these words, we have received the Holy Spirit, and so, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained...here is the Kingdom of God. God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, rather God sent His Son into the world to save it and from His fullness we have all received grace upon grace. Here is the Kingdom of God. As Christian witnesses this is who we are, we are the manifestation of that grace upon grace...the manifestation of the Kingdom of God within our world and we set before others the very Kingdom of God when we share that grace, when we share the Word that is Jesus Christ out there and not just in here. Saint Paul reminded the Romans in his letter to them when he wrote:

¹³ Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another.

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. ¹⁹ Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification.

We have been blessed with the Holy Spirit and we show great reverence to God through that Holy Spirit as we gather here in this place. But as we go from this place, from this metaphorically locked room, what do we do with our faith? Does it remain locked in our judgment or does it become grace for others? What about the Holy Spirit and our reverence to God, do we keep that locked away in the church and only get it out when we are in here? The Holy Spirit given to us by Jesus Christ says or commands that we have the POWER to forgive sins. But the truth is, as St. Ambrose writes...the truth is that no one does Christ greater injury than those who choose to “prune” this command to forgive as we have been forgiven and reject this office that we have been blessed with.²

Jesus is reminding us today that we have received the Holy Spirit and by that Holy Spirit we have been commissioned to be that peace and that grace given to us through the Holy Spirit. Jesus does not give us silver or gold; we have been given the Holy Spirit. In that gift given to us is the expression of the divine indwelling that flows from the exulted Jesus to us and from us flows to others. And that exultation and glory of Jesus Christ is revealed and recognized not in glowing dazzling glory, but in bodily wounds... wounds that are received being in the world, being true to who He is and not being locked in a room out of fear. Nonetheless, for us His wounds are the foundation of eternal life, the foundation of the forgiveness we share with the world, and most certainly the foundation of the Kingdom of God.

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

² Joel C. Elowsky, Editor, Thomas C. Oden, General Editor. *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2007. Section, 20:21-23, *The Gift Of The Spirit For Forgiveness*, page 359-365, “The Church Forgives And Retains Sin.” Ambrose, page 363