

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.

In light of the four-member crew who traveled deeper into space than any humans in history this past week, I begin today with the words of the late astronomer Carl Sagan who said: “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” With these words, Sagan was talking about UFOs and alien landings on the earth. Nonetheless, his point is clear. If someone were to tell you or I about aliens among us, in order for us to believe, it’s going to take more than a newscaster making ridiculous claims, the evidence is going to have to be very extraordinary as well as very trustworthy and concrete. We are going to need to see the plaster tire tracks, foot prints, dog smelling prints, and the twenty-seven eight-by-ten color glossy photographs with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one explaining what each picture is.¹ Would you honestly believe me if I were to say to one of you out here in the narthex, in the parking lot, or in the privacy of my study, “I have seen the Lord!”

Today is officially entitled the Second Sunday of the Eastertide or the Second Sunday of Easter. On this day, no matter which cycle of the common lectionary we are in A, B, or C, preachers, pastors, and or priests using this lectionary encounter Thomas within the appointed Gospel text. And from this encounter, Thomas is viewed as the one who doubts...Doubting Thomas. I have read some sermons and even commentaries that are very harsh concerning Thomas. When discussing or reading about Thomas he is referred to as a skeptic, a doubter, and one even called him a schmuck. As I said, would you believe anyone who came up to you and said, “I have seen the Lord”? Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence and we would need that extraordinary evidence.

With this said, I do not think that even the writers of John’s Gospel want the reader to see Thomas as the only doubter. The way I am understanding Thomas is that he is just like each one of us...who react in the same way the other disciples are...extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, and there’s not a soul sitting in here today, myself included, who wouldn’t say:

"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25)

As I look at this Gospel lesson through the lens of John’s Christology, or John’s understanding of the person and nature of Jesus Christ, I hear Thomas’ words, “I will not believe” a bit different. First off, is Thomas saying that he will not believe in Jesus Christ or will he not believe the story the other disciples are telling him? I don’t believe that Thomas is questioning the validity or the reality of Jesus Christ, I think Thomas is questioning the other disciples themselves. And I believe this because of the way John is telling us this story today in this Gospel lesson. Listen again to the opening line of our lesson today:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." (John 20:19)

¹ Arlo Guthrie / Garry Sherman, *Alice's Restaurant Massacre* © Primary Wave Songs, Appleseed Agt, Appleseed Music Inc, 1967

Once again, we hear that it was evening. It was actually Sunday evening the first day of the week and it was dark or getting dark. John is the Gospel where light and darkness play an important role...in that...darkness lasts until someone comes to believe in the risen Christ. It can also mean a disbelief in, a separation from, or a lack of understanding of Christ. But I like the way Raymond Brown, a very respected New Testament scholar explains the darkness, in that, it lasts until someone comes to believe in the risen Christ.² And today in the Gospel, we hear it is getting dark, the doors of the house where the disciples are gathered are locked.

Yes, it is understandable that there is fear, but the evening or the approaching darkness is mentioned, indicating something about the belief in the room...the belief in Christ and NOT what someone is telling them as we hear from Thomas. But we know at this point that the darkness has been dispelled since Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple know that the Lord is risen; but fear and dare I say “doubt” mark the lives of these disciples locked up in this house, despite Mary Magdalene’s report to them about what had happened at the tomb.³ In other words, they have heard what Mary has said to them, but the locked door along with the approaching darkness, even though the belief of the disciples is not mentioned, these two things indicate that they too will not believe unless they see the marks of the nails on his hands and the wound in his side. But none of them are referred to as doubters, or skeptics. I never encountered any commentary or sermons calling this group locked up in this house a bunch of schmucks. And as I think of myself in this situation, I too would be in that house and I would more than likely been the one who locked the door in the first place.

And what would place any of us in this locked house? What would you truly and honestly say or do if someone were to say to you today, “I have seen the Lord!” Without even hearing your answer, I’ll just say come and join us in the house, it’s getting dark out there, you’ll be safe in here. In fact, if one were to really look through the Gospels one would find that on sixty-eight occasions the disciples are described as fearful or afraid, questioning or anxious, amazed or perplexed, and without understanding. Here are the folks that have walked with him, listened to him, literally sat at his feet and were taught by him, even ate with him, and been in the presence of his light but still remain in the darkness of their fear and doubt. Why would we even think we would be any different?

So, at the very start of our Gospel lesson today we hear that it was dark and the disciples are in a house with the doors locked. And we know that Thomas is not in that group gathered in the house where the doors are locked. But a week later listen again closely to what John says:

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."
(John 20:26)

The disciples are in the house again but John says nothing about evening or darkness, and the doors are shut but they are not locked. What I am getting at is that there is just as much doubt in the first meeting with Jesus as there is with Thomas. The doubt in the first meeting is the darkness and the locked door and in the second meeting, Thomas comes to represent the doubt.

² Raymond E. Brown S.S., *A Risen Christ in Eastertime, Essays on the Gospel Narratives of the Resurrection*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991. Page 66.

³ *Ibid* page 66

I think we all share in that same doubt. Sometime our doubt is obvious and sometime it is a little less obvious, but doubt is always around us.

What stirs our doubt? What darkens our faith and locks it away? Is it because bad things happen? Is it because we assume our faith will make us better than what we see in the world? Do we doubt when we suffer? Is it dark and frightening when we come to the realization that we are no different than the world in which we live in?

Look again when Jesus appears both times. 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 world out there, 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 might see as a threat...or perhaps a threat to their faith? Does our faith keep us safe in this room that not only keep non-believers out, but obviously keeps belief in?

Nonetheless, Jesus enters that place and gives his peace to those gathered in that house, just as his peace is given to us. This is not a wish, it is not a greeting we share with one another, it is a fact that goes way beyond the simple greeting of, "peace be with you." In the Last Supper Jesus proclaims,

"Peace is my farewell to you; my peace is my gift to you; and I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."
(John 14:27-28)

It is in this Holy Meal we are blessed with the presence of Jesus Christ and the peace of the Lord that comes through the Holy Spirit. But as we go from this place, from this metaphorically locked room, what do we do with that peace that the Lord gives to us? How does our faith manifest that peace beyond these walls? 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.⁴

Jesus is reminding us today that we have received the Lord's peace in the midst of fear and doubt. By the very Words of Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit we have been commissioned to be that peace and that grace given to us in Word and in Sacrament. We have been commissioned to be the extraordinary evidence of God's peace given to us through this Holy Word and in this Holy Meal.

⁴ 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

Jesus does not give us silver or gold; we have been given a promise of the Lord's peace which is forgiveness and life. In that gift of peace 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 extraordinary evidence of God's glory is Jesus Christ. Blessed are we who have come out of the darkness and have come into the light of this extraordinary claim...that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, alleluia!

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