

Sermon, April 19, 2020

Grace mercy and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Happy Easter! And may Easter blessings continue to abide with you and your families during this challenging time. God has come to us in the power of the Holy spirit and given us faith to believe in Christ's resurrection. We give thanks to God that faith is such a rich and deep gift, so that especially in times of great challenge and trouble, we might find the sustenance of faith truly satisfying, and the hope of faith truly uplifting.

It is important on this second Sunday in the season of Easter that we celebrate and nurture the gift of faith, for the Gospel lesson today raises the other possibility, which is always an issue, and maybe is more true of our Christian lives over time than we acknowledge, that of doubt, or unbelief. Living in the situation we find ourselves, where we seem to be powerless in the face of forces that seem to overwhelm, how can we find a stronger faith and keep doubt at bay?

The fact that we can talk about faith as a gift from God may seem to hide just how hard it is to come to faith, to keep the faith, or even to decide to believe in times when doubt is strong. There are biblical grounds for understanding faith as a decision, such as Joshua's famous challenge to the Israelites in Joshua 24:15; "choose this day whom you will serve;" or even in today's lesson where the risen Christ tells Thomas, in verse 27, "Do not doubt, but believe." And indeed, on some days in the life of a Christian, it will take an act of will to insist that we believe, even if our hearts are really faltering. But the German theologian and father of Lutheranism, Martin Luther, was clear in his teaching about the nature of Christian faith. In the Small Catechism, he taught in his explanation of the third article of the Apostle's Creed that,

"I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith."

What Luther is saying here can be understood as a confession of faith about faith, about the nature of faith, and where it comes from. Luther wants to move responsibility for believing away from us, take it out of our hands, and he wants to leave it in the hands of God through the Holy Spirit. Faith for Luther is too precious a thing to leave up to us. If the ultimate fate of our souls, as well as that of the survival of the church throughout time and history, depends on humans having faith in the risen Christ, Luther sees that as a dangerous proposition. I know it may sound like a contradiction, but the ultimate success of God's project of salvation "through faith in Jesus Christ" as the saying goes, cannot depend on the faith that humans carry in their hearts, but must depend ultimately on God's grace, God's will and God's power. In a Lutheran understanding of the human being, we are too fickle in our allegiance, too weak in our fortitude, and too distracted in our attention to give Christ the faith he deserves. Not that we are therefore to stop trying to have faith. No, we are called to faith all the more, called to trust, called to believe. That is the church's purpose. But Luther believed that if faith in Christ leading to eternal salvation were left to us, no one could be saved, as the disciples exclaimed to Jesus in Luke 18:26, "Who then can be saved?"

So saving faith, the faith that supports the church and carries Christians through their lives and even sustains them at the hour of their death, this saving faith is a gift from God, and it is because God loves us so much that we can trust that God is providing and nurturing this saving faith in us through the Holy spirit. It is this faith in God's faithfulness that we celebrate when we remember our Baptisms, as we did at the beginning of this service. In baptism, Christ blesses us with faith and calls us into believing. We follow imperfectly, we believe imperfectly, we trust imperfectly, but God is trustworthy, God is steadfast, God is faithful. Thanks be to God.

And that is certainly one of the truths of this story about Thomas's encounter with the risen Jesus. Jesus goes the extra mile, so to speak, to make sure Thomas has what he needs to believe. It may sound strange to talk about Jesus' work after his resurrection as something "extra", but isn't anything and everything after death extra?! So I dare to talk about Jesus extra work this morning, on behalf of Thomas, on behalf of the disciples as a whole, and then on behalf of the church. This extra effort on Jesus' part proves God's unfailing will to rescue us all, and it should be especially encouraging to those of us who have trouble believing. It also

produces an amazing harvest for the church, one which is tied directly to Thomas and his legacy.

Each year on the Second Sunday after Easter, the schedule of portions of the Bible that are read each Sunday in Worship, which we call the lectionary, always has the story of Thomas's famous challenge to the other disciples, that "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." (v. 25) This is how Thomas gets the nickname, Doubting Thomas. He has missed out on Jesus' first visit to the other disciples, which happened on Easter day itself. He also missed out on Jesus dispensing the Holy Spirit to his disciples, so he's not getting any help there. So when the disciples are together again on the following Sunday, and Thomas is with them, Jesus shows up again. And not only does he show up again for the whole group, but he makes a special point to address Thomas and ask him to touch the wounds of his hands, and the wounds in his side. Then Jesus tells him not to doubt, but to believe.

And, thank God, Thomas is able to believe. In fact, he responds with a proclamation of praise: "My Lord and my God"! This exclamation is important because it summarizes the content of John's Gospel. Jesus is Lord and God. This is what the church proclaims. And in John's Gospel, it is Thomas, the doubter turned believer, who gets to proclaim so clearly, so boldly, this truth of the Gospel message. Thomas stands in for all the disciples, and also for the church who are John's immediate audience. Thomas sees Jesus as his Lord, that is, his master, the person and being to whom he owes complete allegiance. But Thomas also calls Jesus "God", that is, the God of Israel, the ultimate divine being, the creator of all things.

Of course, this is good for Thomas, and for his own faith and salvation. But John seems to have a special purpose in this account, just to emphasize the importance of what is happening here. When we look at the construction of John's gospel account, we see that the other place in the Gospel where Jesus is proclaimed to be identical with God is in the very beginning of the book. In John 1:1, it says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus is the Lord the giver of Life, and the Word of God, spoken by God when God created all that exists. So, the effect of these two statements, one in the very first verse of the Gospel, and the other here at the end, in Chapter 20,

verse 28, are like bookends to John's entire gospel account. It's as if John is saying to us, the whole content of my book adds up to the truth of this proclamation, "Jesus is our Lord and God."

In the end, Thomas, who doubted the other disciples' astonishing testimony that Jesus was raised, sees Jesus for himself, is invited to touch Jesus' wounds, and explodes in praise of who Jesus as Lord and God. If he had missed the Holy Spirit on the prior Sunday, he's not missing it anymore, for we know only the Spirit working in us can proclaim that Jesus is Lord, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 12:3. Thus does Thomas become for us a great example of what it means to have faith in Jesus. True, he has the benefit of first hand, face to face encounter with the risen Jesus, and Jesus seems to acknowledge as much when he further tells Thomas and the others, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

But Jesus has done much more than simply give Thomas the ability to believe. Jesus also provides for the millions of Christians through the centuries who will come to faith because of the witness of these apostles. All of them will be sent to testify. All of them will build churches around the world. But in Thomas there is a special legacy for the church in south Asia. For in retrospect, that is, in looking back through church history to trace the legacy of this moment in John's Gospel, we find Jesus kick-starting Thomas's own apostolic mission, which will lead him out of the middle east and all the way to the southern tip of India. In a touch of Gospel irony, Thomas starts out in this scene the unbelieving holdout, and ends the scene as the proclaimer of the Gospel, the disciple who will travel the farthest of all the disciples in his mission for Christ.

Thomas's legacy as an apostle is alive in the community of Saint Thomas Christians of south India. Their tradition claims that Thomas sailed from the middle East to India at the behest of an Indian king named Gondophares. Thomas was so successful in his mission that he built seven churches there, and many people converted to Christianity. These are the Christians of the state of Kerala in South India, who call Thomas their patron saint. After this early success, Thomas is said to have traveled to the eastern side of the tip of India, to what is now called the state of Tamil Nadu, where he continued his work. Unfortunately, there he was opposed by religious leaders and martyred. Today, near Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu, there is a Roman Catholic church on the sea coast that

claims to have been built on top of Thomas's grave. I have personally travelled to visit this church. It is so revered, and people claim the place has such spiritual power, that hundreds of thousands of Hindu, Christian and Muslim pilgrims visit every year.

Another great irony of this story is that over the centuries, many outsiders and travelers dismissed the reports of Thomas' mission as pure myth or legend, in essence doubting the veracity of the Thomas Christians' claims of a long historical lineage going back to Thomas himself. Doubting Thomas has his own doubters, go figure. Yet, historical work by scholars on the traditions, practices, worship, songs and stories of the Thomas Christians, has been joined to archeological and scientific research to show that it is likely that there are great strands of historical truth to this tradition. And that is why all 28 million Christians in India, roughly 2 and a half percent of the Indian population, whether they are Catholic, protestant or orthodox, express great pride in the antiquity of this tradition. It is a rare gift among Christians communities around the world to be able to celebrate such a long and possibly unbroken tradition going back to one of Jesus' own disciples.

What I want to commend to you today, and why I relate this bit of church history to you, is to remind you of the blessings and possibilities of the gift of faith that you have been given through the Holy Spirit. We like to say that God will finish what God started, as the apostle Paul declared in his letter to the Philippians, 1:6; "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." The 'you' Paul was addressing were the Christians who had come to faith through his work in the town of Philippi. Now, the 'you' has also come to mean you and me, for we are but extensions of Paul's work, and not only him, but we are extensions of the work of all the apostles, who followed Jesus because they were called, and served him because they were given power and faith through the Holy Spirit. Trust in God, believe also in Jesus, and follow in the faith, so that the church may continue to carry the flame of faith in a world that needs to see this light.

And remember how Jesus provides for his church in all of its doubt. One could say that Jesus might have left Thomas out of everything, since Thomas missed out on the first Easter appearance, when Christ appeared to the women, and then to 10 disciples in the room where they were staying. If Thomas had missed the second meeting with Jesus, would he have just been left to fend for himself? Would Jesus

have continued to search him out, or just let it go, counting that ten disciples were better than nothing? There is no rule that says Jesus had to come back for him, for in John's Gospel account, Jesus had already provided the Holy Spirit to the group on Easter Sunday. The group had what they needed to get going, to do the work of building the church. But Jesus came back for them again, but especially for Thomas, to bring him from doubt into belief, to bring him into the new reality that was born in Jesus' resurrection power.

And Jesus comes back for me and you, again and again. Jesus came back to the disciples on Easter Sunday, and he comes back to them this Second Sunday, who were in a frenzy because of his appearance the week before. This second Sunday starts to establish a pattern, one which becomes part of the church's DNA. That pattern is that every week, on the first day of the week, on the day of the week on which Jesus was raised from the dead, Jesus would meet his disciples, and dispel their doubts and fears. It also points to our Eucharistic fellowship, which we cannot practice right now, but which proclaims every Sunday that Christ handed over his body for us, and was willing to shed his blood for us, and that when we gather in his name, and celebrate that meal of remembrance, then he is with us, truly present, and blessing us through faith. May this faith keep you, hold you, embrace you, lift you up, and sustain you through all challenges and trials. In this time, when people who are careful fear for their well-being, and those who are reckless call for an end to all precaution, let faith be your guide. Trust in God, be patient, value and protect the gift of life over worldly concerns, have faith that God will see us through this challenging time. And May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.