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Easter 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Forgiveness is the Key”

Text: John 20:19-31 (1 John 5:6)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I feel sorry for poor, old Thomas. Because even after nearly 2,000 years, he has not been able to shake *this one episode* from his apostolic resume. Whatever he did before this and whatever he did after this all shrinks into the background, and he has been forever known and labeled because of one unfortunate moment in time, when, consumed with grief and gripped in fear, he blurts out, **“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.”** And so he is “doubting Thomas” to this day – a phrase used even by those who do not know the biblical story! . . . And you can almost imagine in the years following, when the apostles were beginning to spread through the region and the surrounding countries and the world, when people heard that an apostle was coming . . . and they were excited! And then Thomas shows up, and they say, *“Oh, the Doubter. We were really hoping for Peter, or maybe John.”* It’s quite a stigma, for poor, old Thomas.

But this story that we heard today is not about Thomas. We make a mistake if we focus on him today. Just as we make a mistake if we belittle the apostolic office because there was a doubter who was an apostle, or if we despise the pastoral office because our pastor is a sinner, or if we criticize the church because it is full of hypocrites. Thomas was not the only apostle who doubted; all pastors are sinners; and the hypocrites in the pews are not just the people sitting around you. . . . No, it is *too easy* to hear this story today and turn into the Pharisee who stands before God and says, **“God, I thank you that I am not a doubter like this man.”** (Luke 18:11) No, this story of Thomas is not told to confirm us in our holiness, or pat us on the back and congratulate us that we are not like him! No, it is in fact just the opposite – to convince us that we are *indeed just like Thomas!* To convince us of our unbelief and doubt, so that we might find relief in the wounds of Christ, just as Thomas did.

For this story is not about Thomas – it is about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. His coming not in judgment, but in grace. His coming to accept the challenge of our unbelief. His coming not to applaud our faith, but to remedy our doubt. His coming not

because we believe, but because we do not believe. His coming to turn unbelievers into believers, and a Doubting Thomas into Saint Thomas. And His coming to you and I still today, not because He needs us but because we need Him. His coming to turn our hearts to faith, that we may be included among those of whom it is said, ***“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”***

And so Jesus comes to His frightened disciples on Easter night, and He comes with peace and forgiveness. He does not hold their doubts and fears against them – in fact, He doesn’t even mention them! No, he comes and gives to them. He gives them exactly what they need – not only the good news and assurance that He is alive and risen from the dead, but that by His resurrection, peace and forgiveness has been provided for all. Sin, all sin, their sin, has been paid and atoned for. Therefore they need not live in fear – in fear of the Jews, or in fear of the future, or in fear of anything – because their leader, their Lord, their Saviour is here *for* them and here *with* them still. He was dead, but is now risen! And He now lives to give His life and peace to all through the forgiveness of our sins. For when we have forgiveness, we have everything. **Forgiveness is the key.**

And so in this reading that we heard from St. John, the resurrected Jesus comes to His disciples, and gives to His church the keys to His kingdom, the kingdom of Heaven. He gives them the authority – His authority – to forgive sins. ***“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.’”*** And so just as Jesus came to His frightened disciples and brought them the peace of sins forgiven, so He sends His disciples, to go out and take the peace of sins forgiven to all people. To people frightened by their sins, uncertain of the love of God, cowering in fear and anxiety – to people like us! And when they speak Jesus’ words of forgiveness, it will be as if Jesus Himself were speaking. His breath, His Spirit, His living words. There are no “maybes” or conditions – He simply tells His disciples to give it! . . . And with this, the Christ of Calvary, with nail marks in His hands and feet, and a spear hole in His side, as He showed his disciples – the One who achieved our forgiveness and salvation, now arranges for its delivery. Jesus gives the key of Heaven, the forgiveness of sins, to His church.

And the setting where this all takes place is perfect – for where are the disciples when all of this takes place? *They are behind locked doors!* Thinking that they will be safe there. . . . But not locks of steel or anything else can protect us from sin. The sins of our past that haunt us, the sin and guilt in our hearts which we just can’t make go away, the sins in the world that are directed against us – no amount of wood or steel, locked rooms or bomb shelters, gas masks or inoculations can protect us against them. There is only one

thing, and that is the protection and forgiveness of our Saviour. The One who can go through locked doors and even into hearts locked in sin, to give the gift of His forgiveness. And so when He comes to us and says, **“Peace be with you;”** when we hear His words spoken to us, **“I forgive you all your sins;”** we know that it is truth that we hear. We know that they are His words, His breath, His Spirit, given to give. And we receive. Heaven is opened, life is given. For when we have forgiveness, we have everything!

And the Introit for today that we sang earlier gave us a wonderful picture of the peace that Christ gives through forgiveness – the picture of a baby. **“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk.”** That’s a wonderful picture of the church! For picture newborn babies, crying their lungs out for their mother’s milk. They do not question its nutritional value, they just know that they need it. They do not search about looking for variety, they know that this is what they need. They do not particularly care about what time of the day or night it is, there is one thing that they are looking for, and as I’m sure you know, they’ll cry and cry and cry until they get it! . . . Well that is how we are to be in the church! Like newborn babies, craving and crying out for the sweet Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; craving the forgiveness of our sins. For that is what we need. Not programs, or methods for improvement, or variety or entertainment. We need what our Lord has come to give; what He has given His disciples to give; what He died on the cross and rose from the dead to give – and that is the forgiveness of our sins. And so God our Father has provided the church, the Bride of Christ, to be our mother, to feed us, His children, with this forgiveness.

Now, perhaps its not very flattering to consider yourself as a baby, crying for and craving forgiveness! After all, wouldn’t we much rather be sophisticated, intelligent adults, and figure out for ourselves what’s going on, and what we need, and how to get it? . . . But that’s the mistake Thomas made. As we sang in the Office Hymn, Thomas applied his adult, rational, critical mind to what he had seen happen, and the resurrection just didn’t fit!

*These things did Thomas count as real: The warmth of blood, the chill of steel,
The grain of wood, the heft of stone, The last frail twitch of flesh and bone.*

*The vision of his skeptic [adult!] mind Was keen enough to make him blind
To any unexpected act Too large for his small world of fact.*

*His reasoned certainties denied That one could live when one had died,
Until his fingers read like braille The markings of the spear and nail. (HS #831, vs. 1-3)*

But as adult and critical as Thomas wanted to be, he still needed what Christ had come to give, and Christ would give it to him as well. And so Jesus lowered Himself to Thomas' level, so that Thomas could see and believe. And then Thomas realized what a child he was – it is the child we all are, children of God. Children, not to act childishly, but to live in that relationship established by God: that He is our Father, and that we are His children. He gives, and we receive. And knowing exactly what we need, it is exactly what we need and crave that He provides in sending His Son Jesus Christ. And in Christ, we are forgiven. *Unlike* Thomas, we have not seen and still do not see the wounds of the Lamb of God – but it is *through* those wounds that we receive all the gifts of God. We heard in the reading from First John that, ***“This is He who came by water and blood.”*** And the water and blood that flowed from His side in death are His gifts to His church today, as we are washed clean from our sins in the water of Holy Baptism, and as we are fed and strengthened in His forgiveness and faith in the body and blood of Holy Communion. And through these means, His Word and Sacraments, although we have not touched Him, He has touched us – as He touches our ears, our mouths and lips, and heads. And because of Him and His gifts, we are among the ***“blessed who have not seen and yet have believed.”*** For we have been forgiven. And when we are forgiven, we have everything, and Heaven has been opened to us!

Life can be very complicated. World politics, job changes, financial struggles, emotional confusion, family pressures, and so many more things that press you hard, and Jesus is not here to add to that, but in fact to take your burdens away. To give you the peace of forgiveness, the peace that only He can give. And it is yours. So live in that confidence, and fear not. For Christ is risen, and gives you exactly, and all, that you need.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.