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Easter 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Peace for Doubting, Fearful Hearts”

Text: John 20:19-31; 1 John 1:1-2:2; Acts 4:32-35

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] **Alleluia.**

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

When today’s Gospel is heard the Sunday after Easter every year, I think the contrast most often made in our minds is between the ten disciples who were in the room that night and Thomas, who wasn’t. Between the ten who believed and the one who doubted.

But I don’t think that’s quite fair. Did you hear what John said in his Epistle this morning? *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands . . .* John and the others saw, and touched. Before that, Mark tells us that *when they heard* [from the women] *that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it* (Mark 16:11). Luke reports that these words *seemed to them an idle tale* (Luke 24:11).

So one of the hymns that we will sing during the distribution of the Lord’s Supper today, those words, I think, could be applied to all the disciples, really. All eleven Thomases . . .

*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* (LSB #472).

And so do we, count these things as real. Though for us it is the chill of the steel of a terrorist’s knife, the heft of the casket being lowered into the ground, and not the wood of a cross, but the cold, sterile plastic and metal of the hospital room where our loved one breathes their last. These things, too, we count as real. And the words and promises of God often seem so small and weak compared to them. Like they did for the disciples. What our eyes see trumping what our ears hear. Doubt feeding fear and fear feeding doubt, and we being drowned in a flood of uncertainty.

And so into that room filled with doubt and fear so thick you could probably cut it with a knife, comes Jesus to give peace. He does not condemn or harshly criticize. I suppose you *could* read His words to Thomas in that way - but I don’t think that’s quite right. Jesus

repeats Himself - *peace be with you* - so His words sink in. Peace to chase away those doubts. Peace to calm their fears. Luke tells us He eats so they know He's not a ghost (Luke 24:41-42). He lets them touch Him, and they do, as John said. And then He does it again, offering His hands and side to Thomas, too. Because He is sending them to proclaim what they had trouble believing. That He who was dead is now alive. The wages of sin have been paid, and so death is forced to release its prey.

You see, that's why Jesus rose from the dead. We were talking a little bit about this in Bible Class last week. It wasn't just that Jesus was God and so more powerful than death. That's good for Him but what about us who aren't God and aren't so powerful? Who are sealed in a casket and buried under six feet of dirt? The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). If you sin, you must pay that price. You must die. We will die. But what if someone were to come along and pay that wage for you? Well then death would have no reason to hold you any longer. And so you too will rise. You can try to pay that wage yourself, pay your way out of death with your good works or sincerity. But you'll never have enough. The price is too steep. There's only one who could pay that wage for you - God himself. So He did.

That's why Jesus says what He says to His disciples that night. Peace. Your sins are forgiven. The price has been paid. And this forgiveness that I won on the cross for you? You now go give it to others. I'm not asking you to do it - I'm telling you, sending you, commissioning you. You were my disciples, followers. Now you are my apostles, sent ones. And I give you my Holy Spirit to do it. Because this peace that you need, so does everyone else. So you will give it to them, in My Name.

Perhaps we think that pretty foolish. These disciples didn't prove themselves very trustworthy or reliable when they were following Jesus - and now He is entrusting this message and the future of His Church to them? To *them*? And think of all the things the disciples would have liked to have heard from a once-dead-but-now-alive Jesus - like, what happens to you when you die? What's it like? Tell us Jesus! Maybe we can write a book . . .

But Jesus doesn't tell them what they *want* to hear, but what they *need* to hear. He could have told them how nice and beautiful a place heaven is, but I've had people tell me how nice and beautiful a place Hawaii is, and New Zealand is, and Paris is, but that doesn't mean I'm ever going to get to those places and see them. So Jesus, instead, tells them not what happens when *you* die, but what happened because HE died - forgiveness. And because of that forgiveness, resurrection from the dead. And because of that resurrection from the dead, life. A life that death can no longer end.

And John did write a book about that. So did Matthew. And John tells us the reason why he wrote his book. We heard it earlier: that *Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you*

may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

For that's what Jesus' life was for - to give you life. A life now that is not consumed by doubts and fears. That's how those early believers could do what they did, what we heard from the book of Acts today, *sharing everything they had; selling lands and houses and giving the proceeds to the apostles*. We don't have to do those things, but it shows us what a new perspective they had because of Jesus' resurrection. What matters now is not what they have or what they do, but what Jesus has done for them.

And that's what we've been hearing about all this church year - what Jesus has done for us. Today, He came to His doubting and frightened disciples, who saw Him die and then thought just like we often think; the only thought that often fills our minds when someone dies: *I just want him back. If only I had her back*. So Jesus does. He comes back to them. But blessed aren't just those who see and touch Me, Jesus says. ***Blessed also are those who have not seen and yet have believed***. That's you. Who believe because of the message of these eyewitnesses, because of the books they did write, and the Spirit who works through that word and in our hearts.

That word which not only tells us that Jesus is risen from the dead and alive, but that we who die will also rise to life again. That's what forgiveness means. That's what it means when you hear me say those words at the beginning of every service here. When I say *in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins* - that doesn't mean you just got away with it! That your sin doesn't matter. No. It means that when you die because of your sins, you will rise and live. Because Jesus did. Because He paid the wage for you. A sealed tomb couldn't keep Him in and a locked door couldn't keep Him out, and neither will your sealed casket or six feet of dirt. So you need not fear death. Though it looks so terrifying and seems so final, Jesus shows us it is not.

But this forgiveness isn't just for the end, to take away our fears, it is also for now, to take away our doubts, too. Because we do doubt. Maybe I could paraphrase John here and say that *if we say we have no doubt, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*. We all have a little (or big!) Thomas in us. Really, not only when death takes a loved one from us, but when family troubles place a heavy burden on you, when disease strikes out of the blue, when persecution comes for your faith, when the world makes Christianity sound so foolish . . . and we wonder: *where are you Jesus? You said you'd be with me? So . . . ? Are you really alive?*

***These things are written so that you may believe.
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.***

Yes, Jesus really is alive. The only bones of Jesus ever seen and touched were living ones, not dead ones.

But the reality is that sin is also alive. In us and in the world. And it causes trouble and it often weighs heavy on us and we don't understand why Jesus didn't just wipe out all the sin in this world so we wouldn't have to deal with it! Well, here's why: because if He would wipe out the sin in this world He would have to wipe out you. Because that's where the sin in the world is. As I said last week, sin isn't just out there, floating around - it's in our flesh. So to destroy sin and wipe it out would mean to destroy and wipe you out. And that Jesus was not willing to do. You He came to save! And so He went to the cross and let it wipe Him out instead.

And then He rose and said: your sins are *forgiven*, so that you may live now and live forever. Now, not wiped out by God's wrath, but your sins washed away by Jesus' blood. Whatever they are. All your failues, all your shortcomings, all the things did you that you shouldn't have done, all the things you didn't do that you should have done . . . And forever, when the grave is forced to release you.

So life may still be tough. It was for the disciple-apostles, and, Jesus says, it will be for us. But, He says your sins are forgiven, and we remember the water of baptism washes us clean. He says your sins are forgiven, and the words of absolution raise us from the cesspool of sin we've been wallowing in again this week and clean us for another week. He says your sins are forgiven, and instead of inviting us to put our fingers into His hands and side, He puts His Body and Blood into our mouths, putting Himself and His life into us, that we may live a new life. *Your sins are forgiven*. I know, I know . . . those words that sound so small and weak compared to the power and strength of sin and death. But they are words that have the power of Jesus' death and resurrection behind them, and so are anything but small and weak.

For think about it: it sounded foolish for Jesus to entrust this message and the future of His Church to these eleven unreliable and untrustworthy disciples. But for some two thousand years now, these words have gone out and made believers out of unbelievers. Even in the face of persecution and martyrdom which tried to stamp it out, of false religions and false teaching that tried to stamp it out, of even threats today which are trying to stamp it out. But they will not. On this rock, Jesus says, on this message, this forgiveness, I will build My Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

So *peace be with you*, Jesus says. To you. My tomb is empty. Sin did not win, death did not win, satan did not win. I won. Your sin is forgiven, your death overcome, and your enemy still fighting like the madman he is, will not win. So *peace be with you*. Peace in the midst of trouble, trial, and tribulation. Peace in the face of death. Peace in sorrow and confusion.

Peace, for **Christ is risen!** [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] **Alleluia!**

And He gives to you His peace.

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 faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.