

# "Faith Inspiring Testimony"

John 20:19-31

April 11, 2010

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

Ok, so now what?

We have just celebrated, not only the most important day in the church calendar, but the greatest event in the history of the world: the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (better known as Easter).

On Good Friday, Jesus won the forgiveness of all sins for all people by dying on the cross. Thus, we are relieved of all guilt and threat of condemnation before God. We have peace – true peace – because we are at peace with God. We never have to worry, never have to feel guilty, never have to experience despair. The cross of Jesus Christ has overcome all of those things.

On Easter Sunday, Jesus proved that His sacrifice for all sin had been accepted by God the Father and that eternal life for His people had been guaranteed by rising from the stone cold tomb to live again. Thus, we have hope, no matter what happens in this life. This is nothing – no person, no situation, no event – that can overcome us. For we have a glorious future. Not even death can stop that. We have been assured of life after death – a life better than the one we have now, a life which is perfect in every way, a life which never ends – because Jesus is alive. The empty tomb of Jesus Christ makes that certain.

So, now what? It is easy to feel a let down on the Sunday after Easter. Attendance at worship is less. The visitors and occasional attenders have stayed home. The special services are over. There is no more special music. But there is still great excitement to be had. We have the most wonderful, life-giving and life-changing message the world has ever known or ever will know. But there are many people out there who don't know it. There are many people within the official membership of our church who, by their actions, apparently don't believe it. We have a wonderful opportunity and an awesome responsibility to get that message out. But how do we do it?

Many in the church today think the best way to accomplish this goal is through one's personal testimony. Although this is more common in American Evangelicalism, it is beginning to creep into Lutheranism as well. When people talk about their "personal testimony", they are referring to their personal experience with Jesus. They talk about what Jesus has done for them and what he means

to them. Now all of this *sounds* well and good. It seems very personal and a good way to help people enter into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Or, is it? One of the things I noticed while reading the accounts of that first Easter is the utter failure of “personal testimony”. In our Gospel reading for today, ten of the apostles were gathered together that first Easter evening in a locked room because they were afraid of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them, showing Himself to be alive. One of the apostles, Thomas, was not there with them. When the apostles brought their “personal testimony” to Thomas about their encounter with Jesus, he wouldn’t believe them.

The same thing had happened earlier that morning. When the women came back from the tomb, bringing their personal testimony about Jesus’ resurrection, that testimony was not enough to convince the disciples. Instead, the Gospel of St. Luke says, “But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.” (Luke 24:11)

Personal testimony, while it is something we may enjoy relating and something we think will help, does not change people. One of the problems is that it is often focused on me, rather than Jesus. It tells of *my* experiences, *my* feelings, *my* take on what Jesus means to me. Secondly, it does not have the power or the authority to make a change in people’s hearts and lives.

What does though? In our Gospel lesson for today, Thomas begins, not simply as a doubter (as tradition has it), but, according to the words of our text, as an unbeliever. He ends up a believer. What made the difference? There are two things that made the difference and they both go together.

First of all, there is the word of Jesus. He appears and says, “Peace be with you.” This is a word of love, a word of forgiveness, and a word of comfort. As St. Paul would later write, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 8:1)

Second, there is the presence of Jesus. Jesus shows Thomas the nail marks in His hands and the wound in His side. It never says whether Thomas actually touched these wounds as he said he would have to in order to believe. Evidently, the mere presence of Jesus was enough. That, along with the word of Jesus, evoked this confession of faith from Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”

Both the Word and the Presence are important here. Mary Magdalene had seen Jesus’ bodily presence at the tomb, but did not believe that He was alive until she heard His Word. The same was true for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus that same evening. They saw Jesus and walked

with Him, but did not believe until He spoke with them and opened Scriptures to them. The presence of Jesus without the word is ineffective.

On the other hand, to hear the word without the presence of Jesus is difficult as well. We want to have the real presence of a person to back up what he is saying, especially when he is saying a difficult thing. And what can be more difficult to believe than that a Messiah who is both man and God has died for the sins of the world and come back to life for the life of the world?

We are blessed to have the same two difference makers as we take the message of last week's celebration into our congregation and out to the world. We have the same powerful Word of God to speak with His authority. The book of Hebrews says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow;" (Heb. 4:12) The Word of God has the power to kill us with the condemnation of the Law and to bring us to life with the promise of the Gospel. "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:22-24)

We have the same real presence of Jesus Christ with us. It is not simply the omnipresence of God – the fact that He is everywhere present. Thomas wanted to see the body and wounds of Jesus and Jesus showed them to him. Jesus does the same for us. He took bread and said, "This is my body, given for you." He took wine and said, "This is the new testament in my blood, shed for you." He commanded us to do this in remembrance of Him. The promise is still in effect. Jesus is present with us today on our altar in the forms of bread and wine.

Like for Thomas, the word of God has created faith within us and the real presence of His Son in the Holy Communion confirms and comforts that faith. This is how we bring this message to the world: through the word and presence of Jesus Christ.

This is the reason why we want to get people into church. It is not to bolster our attendance figures. It is not to get their support in running this religious institution known as Peace Lutheran Church. It is not so they can perform some sort of religious duty. And it is certainly not to entertain them. It is so they may hear the Word of God, receive the gift of faith (if they do not have it) or have the gift of faith strengthened within them (if they already have it), and have the benefits which faith gives. The written Word of God, read and preached, can do this. St. John says that clearly in our

Gospel for today, “Thes [things] 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.” (John 20:19:31)

The other reason to get people into church is so that they may experience the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Communion so that the faith which they have been instructed in and confess may be strengthened and upheld. The body and blood of Jesus Christ conveys the forgiveness of sins and thereby fortifies and reinforces that faith for the coming week ahead.

Does this mean that church is the only place where this happens? No, but it is one of the surest places. Here the Word of God is spoken in a trustworthy way because Jesus has attached His authority to the speaking of His chosen representatives. Of them, Jesus said, “He who listens to you listens to me;” (Luke 10:16). Jesus has also attached the promise of His presence to the gathering of His people. He said, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matt. 18:20) And it is here, on the altar and not in our homes, where Jesus is present in a special way – His body and blood in, with, and under mere bread and wine.

Does this mean we never use any personal references when we speak the Word of God? No. You who have listened to my sermons know that I use personal references. Such references are not wrong or sinful. However, we need to remember that the emphasis is not on us, our feelings, or our experiences, but on God, His Word, and His actions for us.

You’ve probably heard the expression, “It’s not always about you!” Nowhere is that more true than in our effort to get the message of Easter, the benefits of Easter, and the hope of Easter out to the people. Faith inspiring testimonies are not about you, but about Him. They are not about what you have experienced, but about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. They are not about what you have to say, but about what He has said. They are not about your presence among the people but Christ’s presence with them and among them. The Word of God with the real presence of Jesus Christ makes up the only true “faith inspiring testimony.” Amen.