

"Are We Any Better?"

John 20:19-31

April 7, 2013

2nd Sunday of Easter

Poor Thomas! You really have to feel sorry for him. Every year, on the Sunday after Easter, we drag out his most shameful moment. Usually we refer to him as “Doubting Thomas”, but it’s much worse than that. Jesus did not chide Thomas for merely doubting His resurrection from the dead. Jesus said, “Do not disbelieve.” The Greek literally says, “Stop being an unbeliever!” Thomas did not simply doubt that Jesus had risen from the dead. Thomas refused to believe that Jesus had risen and was alive.

Thankfully, we are much better than Thomas, aren’t we? We completely believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and show it by our actions. We regularly assemble here to worship our living Lord. We faithfully confess the creeds which say, “The third day He rose again from the dead;” (Apostles’ Creed) or “And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures.” Last week, we had a big celebration of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. The church was filled which showed that even more than just the regular crowd has some sort of belief in Jesus’ resurrection. You don’t see this enthusiasm for mythical Roman or Greek gods or for dead prophets like Mohammed. Surely, we believe in the resurrection....or do we?

If we truly believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, why do we live with such doubt? The disciples were filled with doubt and worry before and after the crucifixion. We are no better. We worry about the needs of ourselves and our families. Will we have enough? We worry about the future of our church. Will we have enough resources and manpower to survive? We worry about our country. Will the economy grow?

If we truly believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, we do we have such a problem with guilt? The disciples had a huge problem with guilt. All of them, especially Peter, felt guilty for having denied or deserted their Lord in His hour of need. We are no better. Many have expended a lot of energy to deny guilt. Guilt used to be a part of our culture. Yet,

in the last few generations, people evidently recognized what a bad thing guilt was so they fought hard to eliminate guilt from our national consciousness. In many ways, they have succeeded. On the other hand, many people still live lives plagued by guilt. Some feel horrible for some bad thing they have done. Others are burdened by their failure to take the opportunity to do good.

If we truly believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, why do we live in such fear? The disciples lived in fear on that first Easter day. They were in a locked room, hiding from the religious officials because they feared for their lives. We are no better. We so often fear for our lives. We read about what North Korea or Iran is doing with nuclear weapons and we become afraid. We think we are doing fine until the doctor goes searching for cancer, or, even worse, when he comes back with the diagnosis of cancer. We are immediately filled with fear because death has become a reality for us. As we grow old, we also can become filled with fear. There is no cure for old age. Death slowly becomes a certainty for each of us.

We say we believe that Jesus rose from the dead to life again, but we often live as if we believe He is still dead. What's the problem? Why are we no different than Thomas and the other disciples? If the resurrection for us is only a theological statement to be believed or a historical fact to be known, it does us no good. It is only when we believe in what the resurrection does that it is of any value to us.

All of those negative feelings which I mentioned before – doubt, guilt, and fear – are caused by sin. God never intended for us to worry, feel guilty, or be afraid and we never would have had we maintained a perfect relationship of love and trust with Him. However, since the sin of Adam and Eve, no one has been able to do that. We worry because we don't trust God. We feel guilty because we have sinned. We fear because we don't believe God truly loves us and cares for us.

Jesus' saving work on our behalf in Holy Week changes all of that. Jesus' death on the cross won forgiveness for all of our sin. That means that our sin has been taken away. None of its effects and consequences can ever destroy us. They can hurt us, but they cannot destroy us.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead is God's ratification of Jesus' work. It is God's acceptance of Jesus' death on the cross for the sin of the world. It is God's assurance for us that sin and death have been defeated. It is God's promise that hell will not be an option for us and our eternal destiny. When the resurrection of Jesus Christ is known, believed, and trusted to do all that, then there is no problem that can defeat us.

But, you might say, that was easy for Thomas and the other disciples to do because Jesus came to them and showed Himself to them. Our situation is much different, we think. Actually, that's not true. We are no different than Thomas and the others. Jesus' flesh and blood appearance to them on Easter evening did not convert them. Apart from faith, Jesus only appeared to be a ghost.

It was only when Jesus spoke words of peace (an absolution or benediction, we might say) that the disciples believed. Even Thomas, who swore he would believe only when he saw the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands, touched them, and put his hand in Jesus' side, was not converted from unbelief to belief by the physical evidence. It was only when Jesus spoke of peace to him that Thomas came to faith. The text never says he ever did touch Jesus' wounds, even though Jesus invited him to do so. It was Jesus' word which changed Thomas's refusal to believe that Jesus had risen to faith in Jesus, as God and Lord, and in His resurrection.

Jesus appears in our midst in a flesh and blood way on our altar every Sunday. Apart from faith, Jesus' body and blood only appear to be bread and wine. Yet when Jesus speaks His Word, using the voices of pastors He has called, that Word has a tremendous effect.

Whether it is the Word of God read from the Scriptures or preached from the pulpit, it does change us from unbelief to belief in who Jesus is (my Lord and my God), what Jesus has done to save us, and that He is alive and among us now.

Our lives are changed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ just as the lives of the disciples were changed on that first Easter evening long ago. Instead of doubt, we live in contentment as the disciples did after that first Easter evening. God will provide for us and our needs. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31-32)

Instead of living with guilt, we live with God’s forgiveness, no matter how awful we’ve sinned or how often we have sinned; no matter how much bad we have done or how much good we have failed to get done. The disciples – even Peter – were absolved of all of their sins that night. We, too, experience that on a regular basis: through our connection to Christ in baptism, by hearing the words of absolution, and in eating and drinking Jesus’ body and blood. As Paul goes on to say to the Romans, “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” (Rom. 8:33-34) God justifies, that is, forgive us for Jesus’ sake. And Jesus who is alive and at the right hand of God is praying to Him for that justification.

Instead of living in fear, we live in quiet peace and bold confidence. The disciples never locked the doors again. They were not afraid because of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. And, even though all of them (except for John) would die violent deaths for the sake of Jesus, they faced death with joy and confidence because they knew, without a doubt, that this could not keep them from the Lord. Paul says the same thing to the Romans and to us:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,
“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

We joyfully live life and confidently face whatever the devil and the world can throw at us.

Jesus is alive. We are alive. And nothing – not even death itself – can ever separate us from Him or Him from us.

Perhaps we should back off Thomas and cut him some slack this year. While not excusing or condoning his unbelief, let us realize that Thomas did nothing different than what we and everyone else has done. Because of our sinfulness, we and Thomas have disbelieved the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, either in our words or by our actions. But, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God, we have received the forgiveness won by Jesus’ death on the cross. We have been given the new life won by Jesus’ resurrection from the tomb. Let us live by the power of His resurrection, not only in our creeds, but especially in our deeds. Amen.