

Sent that You Might Believe

Easter 2

Pastor Josh Frazee

John 20:19-31

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

He is risen, He is risen indeed, Alleluia! Last weekend we heard that wonderful proclamation; and we continue to share it with one another this weekend, and, really, all of our lives. Christ is risen from the dead and we know that He has earned not only the forgiveness of sins but even the assurance of eternal life for those who keep the faith.

If I may borrow another idea from Concordia Seminary St. Louis President Dale Meyer, now was the time for Jesus to take it easy, right? He had completed His work on the cross. Now He and His disciples could sit back and relax, going fishing and enjoying each other's company. Now it was time for retirement. Right?

Last weekend we already heard that the Gospel news of Jesus Christ would be for all people no matter what their race or socioeconomic status. But how would they hear if Jesus and His disciples closed up shop and went on eternal break?

No, Jesus didn't retire. He returned to His disciples and gave them what they would need to share His Word with the world. He gave them what they needed, and then He sent them out.

Verse 1

“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week (that Sunday), the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘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 any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’”

Like we heard last weekend, Jesus was raised on Easter Sunday. Today, which is another Sunday, we hear how He appeared to ten of His disciples in the locked room that very night. He came and showed them His hands and His side. This was not an impostor; it was the same Lord Jesus who they had seen crucified on Good Friday, with nails piercing His hands, and whose side was poked with the spear of the soldier.

After the disciples have had time to enjoy the fact that Jesus is alive once more, He commissions them. He sends them out to proclaim the Gospel of sins forgiven, but also to withhold forgiveness where it is appropriate. He said to them, “‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’”

But note that Jesus did not give this Office to any one of the apostles. He gave it to them, the entire group. By His words and actions, Jesus was creating the Church of the New Testament, of which we are now a part. It is Jesus' Church, it is His creation. He determined the way things should be done, and He passed that on to His disciples, to His Church. Today we continue in the same Church, trusting Jesus' Word that “‘where two or three are gathered in (His) name, there (He is) among them.’”

Verse 2

“Now Thomas...was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hands into his side, I will never believe.’ Eight days later (the next Sunday by Jewish inclusive reckoning), his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said... ‘Do not disbelieve, but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”

The first Sunday after Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared once more to His disciples, but this time to all of the remaining eleven. We hear how the disciples had begun speaking of Jesus’ resurrection, starting with Thomas. Unfortunately, Thomas doubted. Even after all they had been through together, he didn’t believe when not just one, but all ten of his fellow disciples had told him that Jesus had been raised from the dead and had come to visit them. Instead, he said that he couldn’t believe without tactile, physical proof.

Jesus gave him that proof, appearing to His disciples and Thomas the very next Sunday. But what Jesus said then is another dimension for the Church which continues to this very day: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” None of us have seen Jesus in His resurrected body the same way that these eleven disciples did. We have seen Him in communion, to be sure, but He has not spoken to us directly as He did His eleven.

Today we have the interesting phenomenon of having movie depictions of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, as well as ones about how others have come to faith in Him. Yet none of these would be possible without faith in the Word passed down through the Church over the centuries. More than likely, there were plays and live performances of Jesus’ life, death, and appearance to His disciples again over those years as well. But what Jesus said remains the same for those time periods as much as it does for us today: we have not seen these things for ourselves. We have seen reproductions based on the testimony of the Word, but we have not seen the real thing. You and I, dear friends in Christ, have been blessed by God with His Holy Spirit so that we can believe the Word which has been passed down to us, both in the Word itself, and in the productions representing it. Which is not to say that movie or play reproductions are all that you or I need as we need not only the Word, but also the community of the Church and the forgiveness and strengthening of faith offered in Jesus’ supper of Holy Communion.

Verse 3

So far we have been shown how Jesus created the Church to proclaim His Word, forgiving sins and withholding forgiveness when needed so that brothers or sisters might repent and turn back, and how the Church would believe based on trusting the Word of the testimony of the disciples through His Holy Spirit. At the end of our text, John summarizes both of these points, as well as the entire Gospel account he had written. He wrote: “Now 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.”

Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection have been proclaimed ever since those first couple Sundays; even to today, another Sunday where we celebrate and proclaim what He has done. That’s just what we do as the Church through Jesus’ Holy Spirit: we hear how we have sinned, we repent of it, and we hear that we have been forgiven for His sake. But we don’t retire, then, no. Even as Jesus was sent by the Father, and then sent His disciples, so we have also been sent by Him to carry His Gospel truth to the world, both Law and Gospel.

What good is it to have a Savior from sin if we don't know what sin is? But we certainly don't leave it at that, either. We apply the Gospel to those who are struck in their very hearts by their sin, just as the Church has done ever since Jesus established it following His resurrection.

Sure, worship may not have been established on Sundays rather than Saturdays yet, but it was still Church when Jesus met with His disciples. He had promised that where two or three were gathered, there He would be with them, and we have seen that to be the case the first two Sundays of His resurrection—both according to our texts, as well as the first two Sundays of our celebration and continued proclamation this year. Others were sent by Christ that you and I might believe, and we are sent these days so that others might believe that He is risen, He is risen indeed. Alleluia! In Jesus' Name. Amen.