

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter: April 27, 2014

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Do you wonder how Thomas could have been so out of touch? He's an Apostle, he should have known what was going on - yet, when Jesus was so cruelly put to death, everything changed. All he could see was darkness and disappointment. His Lord had been crucified, dead, and buried. His world must have completely fallen apart. No matter what the others told him, Thomas simply would not believe that Jesus had actually risen from the dead! But was what happened to Thomas all that different from the sudden turns and catastrophes that sometimes afflict you? One moment everything seems fine, then suddenly there's nothing left but shattered hopes and growing doubt. Thomas reminds us that we all are doubters. For all kinds of reasons, in all kinds of ways, we all doubt the words, promises, and blessings of God. The reason we have doubts is because we're sinners - and doubt is the most basic, fundamental sin of all. It was the original sin of Adam and Eve, who doubted and disobeyed God's Word - and this same lack of faith is the driving force behind every sin that's ever been done.

Have you missed out on the peace, joy and confidence that you know you ought to have, knowing that God is looking out for you and taking care of you? How many times do your doubts then cause you to be fearful of sickness, death, or sometimes even life itself? How frequently do you find yourself locked up in your own little rooms of doubt, self-pity and fear? Do you not then face the temptation to question God's mercy, or to be skeptical of His grace? Might such questioning ultimately

convince you to think that God doesn't care - or that perhaps He doesn't exist at all? Believe me, even the great Reformer, Martin Luther, struggled with such doubts. So we shouldn't be all that surprised when we confront these and other struggles.

When we think about Thomas, what's the lesson we should learn? Our initial tendency is to focus on him - first on his sinful doubting, and then on his faithful confession - but then all we do is make the story into a warning and an example so that we don't fall into the same sin. And that entirely misses the point! Remember that the Scriptures point us to Christ, so keep in mind everything that He does - meditate on His response to Thomas, the other disciples, and to you today. This incident begins then with Thomas demanding: "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into His side, I will not believe!" And what does Jesus do? He says to Thomas: "Look at My hands. Touch My wounds. Put your hands here into My side. Be no longer doubting, but believing." And isn't that what Jesus does for His people today? He responds to our doubts with the very same compassion He showed Thomas and the others - with the very same love that took Him to the Cross - and with the very same forgiveness He won for us there. He comes to you - locked up inside your own little room of doubt, worry and fear - and He grants you His peace.

Does your Lord scold you for doubting? Actually, He comes today to ease your doubts and strengthen your faith -

responding with forgiveness. Since we and our loved ones share the doubts of Thomas - we all ought to find great comfort in this fact - that poor "Doubting Thomas" is not remembered by the Church for his doubting, but instead as one of the sainted Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. The flesh and blood of Jesus were more than sufficient to assuage Thomas' doubts and replace them with the faith and Spirit of God. Therefore Thomas didn't die in unbelief, despair or shame, but in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection. He didn't stay locked up in that little room, but it is reported that he spread that Gospel of the crucified and risen Savior to the farthest ends of the earth. Today Jesus Himself comes to you because faithful St. Thomas was the first among many pastors who were, are, and will be sent out into the world - and into the Church - with the preaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments of Christ.

Indeed, that's the meaning of the word, "Apostle." It means quite simply "one who is sent." In Biblical times an "Apostle" was one who had been sent as the personal ambassador or legal representative of another - meaning that those who received an Apostle of Christ, were, in fact, receiving Christ Himself. That was why Jesus said to His Apostles, "He who hears you, hears Me; and he who receives you, receives Me." Through the Apostolic Ministry of sinful, doubting men like Thomas, Christ Himself has continued to come among His people with the mercy of His nail-scarred hands and spear-pierced side, so that sinners like you and I might receive the eternal life and salvation which Christ earned for us all with His suffering,

death and resurrection. Every gift Jesus gives through His Church has been summed up in the words He spoke to Thomas and the others: "Peace be with you!" It's a common liturgical greeting borrowed from the Jewish synagogue, but it's filled with new meaning ever since Christ's resurrection. That's why when these words are spoken in the Liturgy today they actually create the very peace they describe from the ears straight to the hearts of all who hear them in faith. Peace be with you, means you are forgiven.

That's why you have come to Church - not simply to obey God's Law to "Sanctify the Holy Day" - but because Christians need to hear the Gospel as much as anyone. We need the peace of God's forgiveness in Christ, for we daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment. So you have come to hear the Word of the Gospel - to partake of the Holy Supper of Christ's body and blood - you bring your children to be Baptized - to receive adoption from our heavenly Father and, above all else, receive God's new life in Christ in the forgiveness of sins. When John described Jesus' breathing the Spirit upon His Disciples, he was inspired to use a word that is used nowhere else in the New Testament. But that same word translates how the book of Genesis described God breathing His life-giving Spirit into Adam at Creation. And just as God's breath gave physical life to all humanity descended from Adam, so now also Christ's breath creates new life in all who hear the preaching of His Apostles - the Gospel Words of our Savior Himself. In this very hour - in this very place - Christ is working in His Church - breathing

His Spirit into His people by Means of His Gospel and Sacraments.

As our Lord attests, you "who have not seen" have been blessed with faith in Christ - not because you've been convinced by the evidence and then decided to believe - but solely because the Spirit of Christ has granted you faith in the preaching of the Gospel, in the waters of Holy Baptism, and in the body and blood of God's Son. We're not blessed because we believe, rather, we believe because we've been blessed with God's peace - a peace that's entirely different from anything this life and world have to offer. In fact, all the world will do is hate you and persecute you and think they're doing a Godly thing if they manage to destroy you.

St. John would spend his last days exiled on the island of Patmos. All the other Apostles, including Thomas, would be murdered for their faithful witness. They, and all the early Christians, were persecuted daily for their faith. But Jesus hadn't lied to them. They really did have peace, joy, and confidence. They knew by faith that whatever this world offered - be it good or bad - it could never hold a candle to the eternal blessings of Christ. They faced death with faith and gladness, knowing that heaven waited for them on the other side of the darkness. Now, like the disciples, our hope isn't only for this life, either. There will always be bills to pay, sickness, disease, and finally death. There will still be fights and arguments with the ones we love. And there will always be failures and disappointments throughout the course of this life.

But through this faith which God has given us, you and I possess the kind of peace, confidence, joy, and hope that only God can give. Regardless of our outward situation - and in spite of our feelings and emotions - we know that because these things have been given to us by our Savior, no one can ever take them away. Because of Christ's death and resurrection we've been given the most important gifts of all - the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. Even in times of great doubt and deep depression - when we feel trapped, and nothing appears to be going right - even then, our confidence is that the Lord has not forgotten us. He has washed us in the water of Holy Baptism and made us His own. He stands before us regularly with the promise of His Gospel in the words of Holy Absolution, granting us the blessings of His peace. And He places into our mouths His very own body and blood, by which our sins are all forgiven. And in these precious gifts He restores our faith and builds up our confidence. In these visible "Signs" we have nothing less than Christ Himself - and in Him, "that peace which passes understanding" - which is to say it's entirely different from the peace of this world. God grant this peace to abide in your heart and cause it never to remain troubled, for it is a peace that takes away fear, and grants you everything God desires you to have in the name of His Son.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.