

April 19, 2020

John 20:19-31

“That You May Believe”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are eye-witness testimony. Not only are they testimony but are presented as narrative history - real stories from those who were there - events which actually happened in time and space. Not only do they frequently show the reasons why certain things happened the way they did, but they combine facts with interpretation. The Scriptures state that *not* only did the Holy Spirit move these writers to write about the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, but the Holy Spirit even works through what was written **That You May Believe**.

A feature of eye-witness testimony as a form of human communication is that it asks to be trusted. This does not mean that it asks to be trusted uncritically, but it does mean that testimony should not be treated as credible only to the extent that one can personally verify it. One cannot personally verify everything that one has learned. As you can see, it is no small matter to consider that whatever we know outside of what we have personally experienced comes from the testimony of others. The point is that trusting testimony is not considered an irrational leap of faith. On the contrary, trust is a rationally appropriate way of responding to authentic (truthful) testimony.

People do not always trust authentic testimony. People also believe in lies. That is what makes testimony so difficult. Any author of lies is a murderer of the truth and serves his or her own purposes. In our Gospel lesson for this morning, we see that Thomas simply did not trust the authentic testimony of the other apostles when they said to him, "We have seen the Lord!" The account of Thomas is an especially helpful testimony for us because Thomas was not with the other apostles when Jesus appeared to them. Like Thomas none of us have seen the resurrected Lord with our own eyes. The authentic testimony of the apostles, who saw the resurrected Lord, seems to be impossible since such things are so far outside of the ongoing, every-day experience of death. But it did happen. Christ Is Risen!

The account of Thomas was written for all those who were not there and may say, "I need to see it to believe it! I need to touch it!" He serves as human eyes and hands for us. He does for us what we might wish to do when it comes to the resurrected Lord. At the same time, we must not forget the reality of the Holy Spirit in all of this. The Scripture commands faith rather than a simple acknowledgment that something is a fact. Apart from the Holy Spirit's work in our lives through the testimony of Scripture, we cannot believe the authentic testimony of the apostles and the words of Thomas when he says, "My Lord and my God!" Apart from the Holy Spirit we cannot believe that Jesus died and rose for us that we might have eternal life. Paul writes, "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14)."

Therefore, we need the Holy Spirit. Luther's *Small Catechism* states: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Indeed! As Paul writes, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3)." And that is exactly what Thomas is saying by the power of the Holy Spirit: "My Lord and my God!" These words are a prayerful acknowledgment of faith in the great victory of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for him!

When Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe!” Jesus graciously stoops to his level as he meets his demands. In a sense, through the account of Thomas we see and touch! The merciful love of Jesus bears great fruit in the life of this apostle, and it bears great fruit for us. Thomas comes forth from the dark night of doubt into the sunlit day of true faith, and this account does the same for all those who may be faithless, while strengthening all of us who already believe. The other apostles who had already seen the Lord were all the more fortified in their faith as they see the merciful love of their Savior in the life of Thomas. These things were written down as a consideration of future generations - you and me - who would believe through their testimony.

It is a miracle that you believe and a demonstration of God’s work. As Jesus puts it, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Your faith is like God creating the heavens and earth out of nothing! The fact of your faith alone in the resurrection of Jesus should disturb the whole unbelieving world, ever causing unbelievers to pause. That you believe in and of itself is a spiritual resurrection from the dead and a testimony to this dying, unbelieving world. All should be utterly shocked and wonder what they are missing to the point that they seek, and by the grace of God, find - that they too might believe!

Find what?! Believe what?! The answer is given in the very beginning of the account of Thomas in case you missed it. It says in very clear language: “Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘*Peace be with you.*’” That word “peace” captures it - “peace” for the apostles, “peace” for you - for all who are full of sin and fear. It was the common Jewish greeting of the time. However, there is nothing common about it here. Christ had been on the cross and Thomas had abandoned his teacher. And, even though Thomas has heard about the resurrection, he was living without faith and full of fear concerning what was next. When Jesus announces “peace” to Thomas (and us), we are to understand that the peace that he gives is that which he gives to the soul battling with sin and every enemy. Jesus is announcing forgiveness and restoration.

Thomas and the apostles were a wreck. From their perspective everything had been lost with the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. In Jesus’ arrest they had been scattered, they had denied him in their own ways, lost their faith, and found themselves to be cowards and in deep despair. The apostles were suffering from a guilty conscience and were facing what seemed to be nothing but a hopeless future. To hear Jesus saying “Peace be with you” was everything that they needed to hear from the one who had said to them before his arrest, trial and crucifixion, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid (John 14:27).”

Jesus reaches into our lives with the same words despite our troubled hearts and fears. Our lives are a wreck in so many different ways. Ultimately, our sin has done it. We are so full of ourselves that we miss everything in Christ. Like the apostles who had to stare at the wreck of their own lives, we stare at our own wreck and strive to look for a relief and comfort that is outside of the one who can really give it. We do that because the eternal solution that our Savior gives doesn’t seem to take care of the immediate wreck before us. Our sin causes us to seek a peace that is born of love for this world and from this world.

The peace that Jesus offered to Thomas was presented to him in visible wounds, which naturally took him to the cross. The fact that Jesus was able to show him those wounds was the astonishing reality of resurrection. Christ desired that Thomas become believing and resurrected from his stubborn unbelief due to sin, and so he showed himself to him. In his visible wounds, Jesus presents to Thomas the cure for all troubled hearts and fears. He presents the true escape from everything that is wrecked. This is exactly what Christ does for us in the Word and Sacraments. Either way we are brought to the gospel of forgiveness, life, and salvation. The death and resurrection of our Lord changes us. The eyes of faith behold the record of Thomas and cling to the same Christ who lived a perfect life and endured the cross and grave that we might be saved.

The purpose of our text and our message this morning is to relate the peace of Christ to the conflicts within us and the afflictions we face during this life. The Christian's hope is based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus, as his death and resurrection is for us the death of sin and new life. We still experience pain and sorrow, the inner conflict between our sinful flesh and spirit, and the war for our heart in this unbelieving world. But, our afflictions do not change the love of God in Christ or negate our hope. The wreck of our down here does not remove what has been given forever. The wounds of Christ come to us in the Word and Sacraments **That We May Believe**. With Thomas, we are able to say, "My Lord and My God!" And with our Lord and God we have the hope of resurrection and eternal life in heaven.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott