

Blessed and Called
John 20:19-31
April 23, 2017 – The Second Sunday of Easter

Today's Gospel Lesson is the second half of a wonderful resurrection chapter, the twentieth chapter of John's Gospel. You remember last week, Mary went to the tomb, found the tomb empty; and, in the midst of much grieving and weeping, encountered the risen Lord. Last week's lesson ended with Mary announcing to the disciples that she had seen the Lord.

So today, we're told that the disciples were together on the first day of the week. That would be today, the Sunday after the resurrection. They were meeting behind locked doors for fear of the authorities who might associate them the Jesus to their detriment. And, somehow, despite the fact that the doors were locked, the presence of the risen Christ "came and stood among them." He said to them, "Peace be with you." He showed them his wounds, and they were filled with joy. "Peace be with you." Indeed, Jesus blessed the disciples in wonderful, joyful ways. In Christ's presence there is joy. In Christ's presence there is hope. In Christ's presence there is love.

But there was one who was not with them – Thomas, who was called "the Twin." Where Thomas was, we don't know. Maybe he was out searching for the body, after Mary reported the empty tomb. Maybe he was going about his life as usual, suspecting that, now that Jesus was gone, the movement was over. We really don't know where Thomas was on that fateful Sunday evening; but, when he returns, the other disciples joyfully report that they have seen the risen Lord.

And Thomas utters a reply that would forever earn him the nickname "doubting Thomas." Now, I think poor Thomas gets "a bum rap." I'm not sure, if I had been in Thomas' shoes, that I would have accepted carte blanc that one of my friends had just risen from the dead. But the key point here is not that Thomas will not believe unless he sees Jesus for himself, unless he sees and touches the evidence of the crucifixion. No, the key point is that Jesus does not give up on Thomas. So, we're told that, eight days later, Jesus again appeared to the disciples; and this time Thomas was with them. And Jesus specifically addressed Thomas. In effect, he says, "Thomas, what will it take for you to believe." He invites Thomas to probe the wounds. You might remember last week, Jesus told Mary not to touch him; we might say not to hang on to him. But here, to Thomas, he says, "Do not doubt, only believe." We're not told whether Thomas actually did touch Jesus, but we are told that, as a result of the encounter, Thomas believed; for he answered, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus did not give up on Thomas, despite his doubts. Jesus reappeared, blessed Thomas, and Thomas believed.

Then comes the most important verse of all – "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to

believe.” Friends, that verse is about you and me. I have repeatedly said that the Gospels were not written for the disciples – they were written for you and for me. We are those who are called blessed because we believe. We have never seen the wounds. We have never touched the body. Yet we are here because we believe in the presence, in the spirit of the risen Christ. We are here because we believe; and with that belief comes blessing.

I hope you are filled with joy whenever you are here, because Christ is with you. I hope you are filled with joy whenever you pray, because Christ is with you. I hope you are filled with joy whenever you reflect on scripture or do good works, or simply take some quiet time, because Christ is with you. I hope you are doubly filled with joy every time you take communion, because Christ is with you, present in amazingly wonderful ways. And indeed, the presence of the living Christ with each of us at all times and in all places is the greatest of blessings.

But there is more; because Jesus didn't simply bless the disciples. He also sent them out. He said to them, “Peace be with you, as the Father sent me, so I send you.” He told them, “You have work to do.” Then he breathed on them, and told them to receive the Holy Spirit. This has been called a Johannine Pentecost. It's John's version of the giving of the Holy Spirit. It's much shorter, more succinct than Luke's version which we'll discuss on Pentecost Sunday, June 4th; but, it's still the report of the Spirit coming on the disciples. And friends, when the Spirit truly comes upon you, you can't simply sit back and pretend it didn't happen.

I tell you from personal experience, Jesus keeps knocking. Just as Jesus does not give up in his attempt to confer a blessing on his followers – the disciples, Thomas, and us; so Jesus does not give up in his call. Jesus sent the disciples out, out into the world, out to preach the gospel, out to do the good works. Indeed Jesus blessed the disciples that they might be a blessing to others. And I believe that Jesus has blessed us, that we might be a blessing to others. I believe that each and every one of us has a calling. Sometimes that calling is difficult to discern; and sometimes that calling changes as we change, as we mature, as we grow older. Still I believe we are called – called to spread the Good News of God's amazing love by our thoughts, our words, and our actions. I also believe we are called to take that Good News beyond the walls of our church out into the world; because there are a lot of folks out there that need to hear that God loves them; and that God wants them to live a life out of that love.

You might be wondering: What happened to Thomas? The Bible doesn't tell us; but the fourth century historian Eusebius reports that he did missionary work in Parthia, which is essentially the region between the Euphrates and the Indus River Valleys. This is in keeping with traditions based on the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* that report that Thomas traveled to India where he preached and was eventually martyred. Truthfully, we can't say for sure what happened to Thomas,

but I think it safe to say that, after his encounter with the risen Christ; his life was changed. He could not go back to business as usual.

So today, I say to you, hear God's blessing – "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," and hear God's calling to go forth, to share the Good News with everyone you can, in every way you can, at every time you can. May you go forth in joy to worship and to serve a risen Lord; and may peace be your way in the world.

Let us pray. . .

Most holy and risen Lord,
We thank you for your presence in our lives,
and for your continual blessing;
and we pray that we may truly use that blessing
to be a blessing to others.
This we pray in your holy name. Amen.

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