

Jesus Raises Lazarus

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John 20:19–31 · Church Postil (Lenker edition)

19 Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. 20 And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. 21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: 23 Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained. 24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. 26 And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. 27 Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. 28 And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. 29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. 30 And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: 31 But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name. John 20:19-31

[1] John the Evangelist further writes that Thomas was not present when the Lord appeared the first time to his assembled disciples on Easter evening. Now that the Lord comes just at the time St. Thomas is the first time absent does not take place without a reason; for Christ could have easily chosen an hour when Thomas could have been found in company with the other apostles. But it took place for our instruction and consolation that the Lord's resurrection might receive more and stronger evidence and documentary testimony. Now, on Easter he appeared to the assembled eleven; one week later, that is today, he appeared to them again and

at the same time also to Thomas for whose sake alone this appearance or revelation took place which is more beautiful and glorious than that of eight days before.

[2] Here we see what a poor thing the human heart is when it begins to grow faint, that we cannot strengthen and comfort it again. Both the other disciples and Thomas did not only hear during the time they were with the Lord that he taught the people with great authority, and later also saw how he confirmed his doctrine by the great miracles performed on the blind, the lame, the lepers, the dumb etc., whom he cured; but also that he raised three persons from the dead, especially Lazarus who had been four days in his grave. And, as it appears, St. Thomas was the most fearless and courageous of all the disciples, in that he said when Christ wished to go again into Judea to Lazarus who was dead: "Let us also go, that we may die with him," John 11:16. Such fine characters were the disciples of Christ and especially St. Thomas, who it appears, had a more manly heart than the others, and besides had recently witnessed how Christ raised Lazarus who had been in the grave four days, and ate and drank with him; yet he could not believe that the Lord himself arose from the dead and was alive.

[3] Moreover, we see in the apostles that we are truly nothing when Christ withdraws his hand and we are left to ourselves. The women, Mary Magdalene and the others, announced it, and now the disciples themselves proclaim that they had seen the risen Lord. Yet St. Thomas is stubborn and will not believe it; yea, and he will not be satisfied even if he see him, unless it be that he sees the print of the nails in his hands and puts his fingers into the print of the nails and his hand into his side. And the beloved disciple will thus himself also be lost and condemned, in that he will not believe. For there can be neither forgiveness of sins nor salvation if one believes not, since therein lies all the virtue and power of faith and eternal life, as St. Paul says: "And if Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith is also vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished," etc. 1 Corinthians 15:14- 18. To perdition will St. Thomas also go, he will not be saved but will be lost, because he will not believe that Christ is risen. And he would have perished and been condemned in his unbelief had not Christ rescued him from it by this revelation.

[4] So the Holy Spirit illustrates and teaches now in this example that without faith we are simply blind and completely hardened, as we see everywhere in the holy Scriptures that the human heart is the hardest thing in the world, harder than steel and adamant. And on the other hand, if it be bashful, despondent and soft, there is no water nor oil so soft as the human heart.

[5] You find many examples and narratives illustrating this in the Scripture. Pharaoh, before whom Moses performed so many terrible signs and wonders that he could not reply to them, yea, he had to admit that it was God's finger and therefore also confessed he had sinned against God and his people etc.: yet his heart became harder and more obdurate continually until the Lord drowned him with all his army in the sea. Likewise also the Jews; the more powerfully Christ proved both by word and deed that he was the one who was promised by their fathers that he should be a blessing to them and to the whole world, the more vehemently and bitterly they raged against him and their hatred, blasphemy and persecution knew no measure nor end until they condemned their Lord and God to the most ignominious death and crucified him between two malefactors, nothing could prevent it although Pilate the judge himself declared against them that he was innocent, creation acted differently than usual and thereby testified that its Lord and Creator hung there on the cross etc.; likewise the thief freely confessed publicly, although Christ truly hung there and died, yet he was a king who had an eternal heavenly kingdom; and the heathen centurion publicly cried: "Truly this was the Son of God," etc. Matthew 27:54. This all, I say, helped nothing to bring about this conversion.

[6] This is the way the godless, condemned world does: the more grace and kindness God shows it, the more unthankful and wicked it becomes. Now it is meet and right for us all to thank God from our hearts that he has revealed his holy Word so pure and clear before the day of judgment, from which we learn what inexpressible treasures he has given us in Christ, namely, that we are saved by him from sin and death, and shall now be righteous and blessed, etc. What is the attitude of the world to this? As its custom is, it does not know how to abuse, blaspheme and condemn this Word of grace and life enough, and wherever possible to persecute and destroy those who confess it, and although the world hears that God will severely punish such sin with hellfire and eternal condemnation, it thinks little about it, goes ahead securely and obdurately, as if it were nothing, and enjoys its sport as we clearly see now in the pope and his following. And yet it is such horrible and dreadful wrath that all creatures are terrified by it. Therefore it is certainly true that no stone, steel, adamant, yea, nothing on earth is as hard as the impenitent heart of man.

[7] On the other hand, if the heart loses courage and is terrified it is softer than water and oil, so that, as Scripture says, it is frightened at a rustling leaf. And when such a person is alone in a room and hears a little cracking of a rafter or a beam, he thinks thunder and lightning are striking him and he is in such anxiety and fear (as I have often seen), that no one can comfort

or strengthen him, and all the preachers and all consoling proverbs are too few to calm him. So there is no moderation with the human heart; it is either entirely too hard like wood and stone, that it inquires about neither God nor Satan, or, on the other hand, it is entirely too timid, fickle and despondent.

[8] Thus the apostles are here too scared and terror-stricken by the scandal they saw in their Lord being so ignominiously mocked, spit upon, scourged, pierced and finally crucified, so that they no longer had a heart in their bodies, who before while they had Christ among them were so bold and courageous, that James and John ventured to bid fire to come down from heaven and consume the Samaritans who would not receive Christ, Luke 9:54. They also knew how gloriously to boast that the devils were in the name of Jesus subject unto them; and Thomas admonished the others and said: "Let us go that we may die with him;" and Peter, more impetuous than the others, smites with the sword among the crowd when they wished to seize and take Christ captive. But now they lie prostrate in great fear and terror, locked up, and will let no one come to them. For this reason they were also terrified at the Lord when he comes and greets them, and they still think (which is indeed a sign that they are completely overcome by fear and despair) they see a spirit or a ghost. So soon they had forgotten all the miracles, signs and words they had seen and heard from him, that the Lord had enough to do during the forty days after his resurrection before he separated from them, in his appearances and revelations in various ways, now to the women, then to the disciples, both individually and collectively, besides eating and drinking with them; all for the purpose that they might be assured that he is risen. Yet it is so hard for this truth to enter their hearts.

[9] Likewise, when after forty days he spoke with them out of the Scriptures about the kingdom of God, which should now commence and be a kingdom in which should be proclaimed in his name repentance and the forgiveness of sins among all nations, they raise the cry and ask him when he was about to ascend from them in a cloud, and say: "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" they have entirely different thoughts of the kingdom of Christ than those he had been teaching them. Here you see how exceedingly difficult it is for bashful and despondent hearts to be comforted and strengthened, even after being rightly instructed, so that they know what kind of a king Christ is and what he has accomplished by his death and resurrection.

[10] Thus both the obduracy and the bashfulness of the human heart are indescribable. When out of danger it is hard and obdurate beyond measure, so that it cares nothing for the wrath or

the threatening of God. Although it hears for a long time that God will punish sin with eternal death and condemnation, yet it goes ahead and is drowned in pride, avarice, etc. On the other hand, when the heart begins to fear it becomes so despondent that it cannot be again reclaimed. It is indeed a great pity that we are such wicked people. If we are not in want we continue to live on in sin without the least fear or shame, yea, to grow stiff like a dead corpse; what is spoken to us is as if spoken to a rock. On the contrary, if there is a change in us that we feel our sins, we are terrified by death, God's wrath and judgment; we on the other hand grow stiff at the great anxiety and sorrow, so that no one can strengthen us; yea, we are even terrified before that which should comfort us, like the disciples were before Christ, who came to them for the very purpose that they might be comforted and made happy. Although he does not at once set them right he has to doctor them during the forty days, as I said. He takes and uses all kinds of comfort and medicine and still he can hardly strengthen them again, until he gives them the right strong drink, namely, the Holy Spirit, of which they drank and were comforted in the right way so that they are no more as before, bashful and terrified. II. Thomas Saved from his Unbelief

[11] Finally, we have in St. Thomas an illustration of the power of Christ's resurrection. We just heard how firm and even stiff-necked he was in unbelief, that although the other disciples unitedly testified that they had seen the risen Lord, yet he simply will not believe it. He appears to have been a fine and brave character who had thoroughly concluded that he would not so soon believe the others. For he had seen that the Lord only three days before was put to death on the cross and the nails driven through his hands and feet and the spear pierced his side. This picture was so indelibly and deeply impressed upon him that he simply could not in the least believe what the others told him, that Christ was risen. Therefore he promptly and defiantly says: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." He thus utters a hyperbole, an exaggerated statement, that he will not believe his eyes alone, but will feel and grope about Christ's body with his hands. As if he would say: No one shall persuade me to believe, but I will stand so firmly upon no, that I will not believe even if I see him, as you say you saw him. But should I believe it, then he must come so near to me, that, if it were possible, I may touch his soul and put my hands into his eyes.

[12] That is to be steeped very firmly and deeply in unbelief. And it is wonderful what he means by it that he at once proposes a thing absurd, to put his hand and finger into the openings of his wounds. For he had always been so smart as to think: Since Christ was again

alive, had conquered death and was rid of all the bruises from the scourging and the crown of thorns, he would surely have healed and removed also the five wounds.

[13] Now, this has happened for our example and consolation, that the great apostle also had to fail and stumble, in which we see how Christ shows and conducts himself toward his weak disciples, that he can tolerate also such who are still as hard and stubborn as St. Thomas is here, and that he will not on that account condemn and disown them, if only in other respects they sincerely wish to continue to be his disciples, and not maliciously blaspheme him and become his enemies; and by this he teaches us that we should become neither offended nor despondent because of that; but in harmony with this his example gently go on with them, serve their weakness, with our strength until they become established and grow strong.

[14] But it serves more to the end, as I began to say, that the resurrection of the Lord is not only clearly shown and proved by this unbelieving and stubborn Thomas, who persevered for eight days in his unbelief, and he lay there grown almost stiff; but also that the power of the resurrection becomes known, and is of benefit to us; as appears in Thomas who thereby was brought from unbelief to faith, from doubt to certain knowledge and to a beautiful and glorious confession.

[15] Now it happens, says the Evangelist, first on the eighth day after his resurrection, when Thomas had established himself in his unbelief in the face of the testimony of all the others, and by this time he is dead and no one hopes he will show himself in a special manner to Thomas. Just then Christ comes and shows him the same scars and wounds, as fresh as he had shown them to the other disciples eight days before, and tells him to reach hither his finger and hand and place them into the prints of the nails and into his side. Christ yields to Thomas so much that he not only sees as others did, but he also seizes him and feels, as he had said: "Except I shall see in his hands," etc., and he says in addition: "Be not faithless, but believing."

[16] Here you see Christ is not satisfied to stop with the narrative; but he is concerned only that Thomas becomes believing and is resurrected from his stubborn unbelief and sin. This follows in a powerful way in that St. Thomas soon begins and says to Christ: "My Lord and my God!" There is at once a different man, not the old Thomas Didymus (which means in English a twin, not a doubter, as has been wrongly interpreted from this text), as just before, when he was so cold and stiff and dead in his unbelief, that he would not believe unless he puts his finger into his wounds; but he commenced suddenly to deliver a glorious confession and sermon about Christ, the equal of which no apostle to that time had yet preached, namely, that

the person, the risen one, is true God and man. For they are admirable words he utters: “My Lord and my God! He is not drunken, he is not jesting nor mocking; he does not mean a false God; therefore he certainly does not tell a lie. Besides he is not here chastised by Christ, but his faith is confirmed, and it must be the truth and sincere.

[17] It is now the power of the resurrection of Christ that St. Thomas, who was so deep and obdurate in unbelief, even more than any other disciple, was so suddenly changed, becomes an entirely different man, who publicly and freely confesses that he not only believes that Christ is risen but is also enlightened by the power of Christ’s resurrection so that he firmly believes and confesses that he, his Lord, is true God and man, through whom, as he is now resurrected from unbelief, the fountain of all sin; so he will also arise from the dead at the judgment day and live forever with him in indescribable glory and blessedness. And not only he, but all who believe thus, as Christ himself further says to him: “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.”

[18] Finally, that Thomas puts his finger into the wounds. I will not argue whether Christ always after his resurrection retained the wounds and prints of the nails; yet I argue they did not appear hideous, as otherwise they might, but fresh and comforting. And whether they were still fresh, open and red as artists paint them, I will leave for others to decide. Otherwise it is a fine idea to picture them before the ordinary person so that he has a memorial and a picture that will remind and admonish him of the sufferings and wounds of Christ. It is possible that he retained the same signs or marks which will likely enlighten much more beautifully and gloriously at the day of judgment his whole body and he will show them before the whole world, as the Scriptures say: “They shall look unto me whom they have pierced,” Zechariah 12:10. This I would commend to every devotional exercise for consideration.

[19] The leading thought, however, for us to learn and retain from this Gospel is, that we believe that Christ’s resurrection is sure and that it works in us so that we be resurrected both from sin and death; as St. Paul richly and consolingly speaks of it, and Christ himself here, when he says: “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed,” and St. John concluding this Gospel teaches and admonishes about the use and benefit of the resurrection: “These are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and believing ye may have life in his name.”

[20] This is indeed a powerful and clear passage, which highly praises faith and gives the testimony that we certainly have eternal life through the same; and that this faith is not an

empty, dead thought on the history about Christ, but that which concludes and is sure that he is the Christ, that is, the promised King and Savior, God's Son, through whom we all are delivered from sin and eternal death; for which purpose he also died and rose again; and that we alone for his sake acquire eternal life, in a way that is called in his name, not in Moses' nor in our nor any other man's name, that is, not because of the law, nor of our worthiness and doings, but alone on account of Christ's merits, as Peter says in Acts 4:12: "There is none other name among men, wherein we must be saved," etc.

SOURCE

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Heading in that edition: "Quasimodo. Sunday after Easter. Fourth Sermon. Thomas Delivered from His Unbelief Jesus Raises Lazarus."