

Second Sunday of Easter: John 20:19–31

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Preached for the Second Sunday of Easter, Year B

There are two kinds of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus – negative and positive. The negative evidence is the open, empty tomb, the grave cloths folded and set aside, the head covering folded separately, and most important of all, no body. If there had been a body, there is no doubt the Romans and the religious leaders of Jerusalem would have paraded the body of Jesus through the streets to put an end to the claim He had risen. It would have been a simple as that. The negative evidence all points to the same conclusion – Jesus had risen from the dead.

But negative evidence never clinches a case. The negative evidence proves that Jesus wasn't in the grave, but it doesn't prove what happened to Him. You can't make an argument for the resurrection of the body from an empty tomb and a folded up burial shroud. That's where the resurrection appearances of Jesus come into the picture. They are the positive evidence. The disciples didn't claim that they believed Jesus had risen from the dead. They stated it as a fact; they gave eyewitness testimony. "We are eyewitnesses of these things." They are speaking under divine threat of perjury.

Not only did the women and the Eleven disciples see Jesus, talk with Him, touch Him, and eat fish with Him, but Paul states that over 500 people saw Him on one single occasion. That amounts to overwhelming positive eyewitness evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In fact, you have as good or better a case for the bodily resurrection of Jesus than you do for the presidency of George Washington or the battles of the Civil War.

Jesus first appeared to His inner core of disciples late in the afternoon of that first Easter Sunday, the first day of the week. The disciples were all together in a single room, perhaps the upper room of three days before. The doors were bolted shut out of fear. The disciples were afraid of the religious authorities, figuring they were successful in crucifying Jesus, now they would go after His followers. This was hardly a group of guys trying to get their story straight before they go public with their claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. This was a frightened group of followers whose leader had been brutally killed. They had left everything

to follow Jesus, their homes, their livelihood, their safety and security. And now they had nothing, and they were scared. Who wouldn't be? I would. So would you.

Into this locked room of frightened disciples, Jesus appears. Notice, He doesn't knock on the door. It probably wouldn't have worked if He had. Knock, knock. Who's there? Jesus. Yeah, right. Quick, Peter, bolt the door. Actually, locked doors don't matter to Jesus. Remember who He is. He's the eternal, divine Word who made and upholds all things. He's the eternal Son of the Father, true God of true God. And now that His work is done, He doesn't hold back on His divine power. He can make His presence known when, where, and how He chooses. And so He just appears in the midst of them, probably scaring the daylights of them.

The first words He speaks are the first blessing of the resurrection. Peace. "Peace be with you." It's a lovely word, "peace." We pray for peace in the world, peace in our homes and neighborhoods, peace in our hearts. Peace means the absence of warfare, the end of all the killing and terror. The Hebrew word for peace is "shalom," which is an even bigger word than our word "peace." It's a double greeting, used for hello and goodbye. Shalom means harmony, wholeness, everything in its place. "Peace (Shalom) I leave with you, my peace (my Shalom) 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."

Peace be with you. Shalom. That's how we greet each other that way around here. Not as the world greets each other, with "Hi, how are you?" a question for which we probably don't want to know the answer anyway. It's a blessing and a greeting at the same time. Peace be with you. We say it to each other before we process our offerings to the altar. Jesus warned about being at peace with your brother or sister before you make your offering to God. You can't claim peace with God and be at war with one other. And so we speak a word that goes beyond our understanding, and sometimes even our will – peace, shalom.

The peace of the Lord be with you always. We hear the peace in the Lord's Supper, having heard the words of Jesus concerning the bread and the wine and how He's giving us His body and blood. In view of the gifts, we again hear that Easter blessing – peace be with you. The church becomes the upper room, filled with frightened or sometimes distracted disciples. And while the doors of this place aren't locked, they could be, if the political and social climate outside were different. There are many parts of the world today where Christians huddle in fear behind locked doors, fearing religious persecution.

The same Jesus comes to us, to His church wherever it's gathered in His Name. He comes with His peace. On the first Easter Sunday, and one week later, He showed His wounds – the nail marks in His hands, the spear mark in His side. The source of the peace. “By His wounds, we are healed.” This isn't some peace brokered at a round table by high level government officials. This isn't a peace enforced by the threat of war. This is peace from the Prince of Peace, who layed down His life to make peace, to reconcile the world to God. In the wounds of His death, in the nail holes in His hands and feet, is our shalom, our peace. The end of the war, the end of the killing and dying, harmony, wholeness, health, life are in those nail holes.

They are the positive evidence. The same Jesus who was nailed to a cross and pierced by a spear is alive and well. The Lamb who was slain, lives, and He has the wounds to prove it. Thomas wanted to see those wounds, and who could blame him? I think that Thomas gets a bum rap when people call him “doubting Thomas.” The Gospel never calls him that. He's called Thomas Didymus, the Twin, but he's never called “doubting.” Unbelieving, but not doubting. He says it flat out, “Unless I see the nail and spear marks and touch them with my own hands, I'm not going to believe it.” He wants to be sure it's the right Jesus. The crucified Jesus. He wants a Jesus with nail holes in Him. And Jesus accomodates him. The next Sunday, when Thomas was with them, He shows Thomas his hands and his side. (Notice that Jesus knew what Thomas had said, because He was present at that conversation too.) And He says to Thomas, “Go ahead. Put your finger in this nail hole. Put your hand into this spear hole. Don't be unbelieving, but believe.”

And Thomas does! He believes, and He confesses in what is the most flat out confession of faith in Jesus we have in the NT: “My Lord and my God!”

What Jesus did for Thomas that Sunday, He does for us every Sunday. He speaks His peace, and He presents His wounds – His body and blood, the fruits of His sacrifice. Those are the wounds of Christ for you. His own body given as bread to eat. His own blood given as wine to drink. And He says to us, as He did to Thomas, “Don't be unbelieving any longer. Trust me. I died for you, to take away all of your sins. I rose from the dead for you, to show my victory over sin and death. I give you my peace, my shalom, a peace you can find nowhere else in this world. And to give you something concrete and real, as real as my hands and feet and side, I give you my body and my blood as your food and drink.”

Jesus' peace and His wounds – those are the first two gifts of the resurrection. And there are more. There's always more with Jesus. Again He says, “Peace be with you.” Once wasn't

enough. He has to say it twice. “Tell Jerusalem she has received double for her sins.” Not just enough, double. More peace than you could possibly need for yourself alone. Enough peace to pass on to others.

The second time He says, “Peace be with you,” He sends them. He makes disciples into apostles. “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” They weren’t going to hang around in the this locked upper room for the rest of their lives. They were sent. Sent into the world for which Jesus died. A dangerous world filled with terror, unbelief, hatred, war, violence. A world that crucified Jesus and wants the same for His disciples. But He sends them, as He was sent by the Father.

The word apostle means one who is sent. We say that the church is “apostolic,” which really means two things. It is apostolic in the sense that we teach what the apostles taught, and we know that from the Scriptures. And it also means that the church is sent out into the world, to disciple the nations by baptizing and teaching, to bring the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection to the ends of the earth.

Jesus doesn’t leave His church short of breath. If the church is going to preach and proclaim, she’s going to need breath. He breathed on them. As He once breathed life into Adam, and He once blew across the waters of the deep in creation and the waters of the Red Sea and the dead, dry bones that Ezekiel saw, He breathed on His disciples. “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Think of it as a little Pentecost. The big one would come fifty days later. This was the little one, ordaining His apostles, with His Spirit-ed breath and with His words.

He gives them authority to do what God alone can do – forgive sin. “The sins of any you forgive, are forgiven them, and whatever of theirs you bind, it is bound.” Perhaps you remember this from another sermon or a Bible class on this verse. I like the variants on this verse. It seems that there’s a slight disagreement on the tenses. “The sins of any you forgive, are forgiven, have been forgiven, will be forgiven.” So which is it? You know my solution. Let’s have all three. The sins you forgive have been, are, and always will be forgiven.”

And that gives you a bit of insight as to what goes on when absolution is spoken. Your sins are forgiven, right here and now, in this time and this place. And they have been forgiven in Jesus Christ literally from all eternity, since He’s the Lamb that was slain from the foundations of the world. And they will always be forgiven, so that that on the last day when Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead, the verdict will be “not guilty,” all thanks to Jesus.

We're a lot like that group of disciples on the first Easter Sunday. We tend to hide behind our locked doors. We're fearful, uncertain, oftentimes unbelieving, confused, worried, anxiety ridden. But we are the Lord's church, and He won't abandon us. He makes every Sunday a little Easter, a first day of the week, the first day of a new creation. Everything that those disciples had in that locked room in Jerusalem, we have here and more. We have Jesus' peace and His wounds, His body and His blood. We have His Spirit who breathes new life into us. We have His forgiveness put into our ears to hear and believe and placed on our tongues to speak.

And in case you missed it, there's one more gift. A bonus blessing, an Easter beatitude from Jesus to you. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." He has you in mind. You can't see Jesus, but you can hear His Word. You can't touch His wounds, but you can eat and drink His body and blood. You don't see now, but you will soon. Now you must believe, trust, take Jesus at His Word, and there is no surer Word than the Word of Jesus.

Blessed are you, believer, blessed are you!

Peace be with you!

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "John 20:19-31 (2 Easter B)", posted 2003-04-27 (<https://htlcms.org/2003/04/john-2019-31-2-easter-b/>).