

Second Sunday of Easter April 8

The second Sunday of Easter is always given over to the resurrection appearance in which Jesus appears to the so-called “doubting Thomas.” Actually the adjective is not doubt as much as it is “disbelieving” or “faithless.” The resurrection is the very heart and core of the Christian faith, it sits at the very center of our being and today we hear Jesus call us blessed, better off than Thomas anyway, because we have not seen and therefore our faith is of a different character than his. Jesus even seems to say that it is preferable.



A generation ago the historical fact of the resurrection was more of a burning question for a lot of people. In the face of modernity, it seemed that much of the Christian church was simply running on the accumulated inertia of generations prior who had actually believed this miraculous tale. There was a serious and earnest movement to pull the props out from under the old system and let the institutional church collapse. One key to that effort (and there were many fronts in which it was waged) was undermining the veracity of the Resurrection. This was not just a movement outside the Church, indeed, its strongest proponents were inside the church. Episcopalian Bishop Shelby Spong made headlines when he admitted that Jesus did not rise from the dead in the 1970's or 80's I believe.

Today Shelby, the Jesus Seminar, Bart Ehrman, and various other individuals and groups are still out there. But for the most part they are striving for the same media attention which they so enjoyed in those halcyon days of the 60's and 70's. Then being a wild heretic meant religion editors of major papers and network news broadcasts could count on you to sell copy and some air time with some titillating headline. They occasionally still make some bizarre comment and the editors will put it out there, almost to test the waters, but for the most part people just ignore this. Even Richard Dawkins' “God Delusion” has not really stirred up that much of a fuss. I don't think that this is because the underpinning of Christianity has been kicked out from under the institution. Americans have remained stubbornly Christian and the numbers of people who confess a resurrection has not significantly changed, it seems.

The relationship they have with denominations has changed dramatically, and I think that the fact they are ignoring the theological wingnuts and no longer loyal to any denominational label is in fact connected. The history questions are no longer compelling for us. We do not doubt in quite the same way that our parents did. Our doubt is still there, mind you. If anything, we may have a greater faith question, but it is not so much focused on the historicity of the resurrection. This is some of what it means to be postmodern. The questions, which agitated us a little while ago, are not as important. Today we want to know what it means. It is not that whether it happened is not important, but it is not the only important thing.

The preacher in today's pulpit will want to be careful that he is asking the questions which reflect the resurrection issues which are churning in the heads and hearts of our folks. If we don't we will be preaching to folks who are not there, or more likely to an ever shrinking group of parishioners who do show up and still care about the questions of yesterday. The Gospel has to be translated into the vocabulary, the needs, and the idiom of this generation.

That means that a lot of the commentaries and preaching aids of a generation ago are not terribly useful for us. What I find interesting is that the sermons and the commentaries of 1500 years ago often seem far more appropriate. Augustine as he watched the Roman Empire collapsing around him often has insightful things to say to people who are engaged in an ever changing world of technology growth, economic instability, and political uncertainty.

If you want to access the sermons of Augustine, I highly recommend the translations which are being put out in the last decade by New City Press out of NY. The problem is that they are not cheap. You can find much of Augustine's work online, but the translations are often turgid and they don't let this master of preaching really speak to us.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, grant that we who have celebrated the Lord's resurrection may by Your grace confess in our life and conversation that Jesus is Lord and God; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever

This is one of those prayers where the littlest words make the biggest difference. Jesus is Lord and God, not "was" or "will be" but "is." That means his lordship and rule, his life is a present reality, a now thing, not a past thing, not a future thing, although it is those as well. It is first and foremost, a now thing. That is the difference between Easter and Lent, while Lent will focus us on the horrors of our past and the terrors of our future, Easter directs our attention to the blessings of our now, the reality that we are the Children of God.

There were ancient dioceses that insisted that people were not allowed to kneel when they prayed in Easter, they had to stand, as befitted the children of God. To kneel was to deny what God had done for them. We often think that standing is a sign of respect. In church it is not, despite the command to stand in a court room when a judge enters. The Christian movement was born in a time when respect was shown by kneeling, and the higher the person before you the lower you knelt. You still can get a sense of this by watching Moslems at prayer. The face to floor kneeling is what respect for God looked like in the ancient world. That Christians stand in prayer or worship is an acknowledgement that Jesus has made us the very children of God. We may stand in his presence because of Christ's good work for us. To stand is to own the resurrection.

We pray in this prayer that our life and conversation may confess that Jesus is God and Lord. Of course, we do that when we stand in church, don't we? But outside that simple act, how do you think our life and conversation make that confession? How would someone hear our speech or

watch our deeds and see that Jesus is Lord? Some time ago, the head Librarian at Concordia where I teach made some students angry with him because he insisted on shutting down the library on the weekend of Easter, no matter how many papers were due on Monday. He said that his staff should get a chance to celebrate Easter. Get your paper done more than 24 hours before it is due! At the same time, some years ago Concordia scheduled a track meet for Good Friday, preventing its student athletes from attending services. That was probably not the right message to send. The shot-putter and devout Roman Catholic in my Wednesday afternoon class at least did not think it was the right message for an ostensibly Lutheran school.

Do we ever tell someone that we cannot be somewhere or attend something because it conflicts with our prayers, with our worship? Do we ask our schools and soccer associations to keep Sunday free from soccer games and the like, or do we just go along with the flow and try not to make our kids look odd or strange because they have faith?

But again, I would remind you of the little words in here. The foregoing two paragraphs ask good and necessary questions, but we cannot forget the word which precedes this line in the text. The confession in word and deed is a gift of God, an act of His grace. The courage to tell our own children that we are different, yes even odd, will not come from within me, not by the exercise of my own will. It will come from my God. The confession of Christ's place in our lives which we make by coming to Church the Sunday after Easter, when the candy is grown stale and the Easter eggs have been consumed, or at least they should have been, and the leftovers from the Easter breakfast are making their way to a landfill somewhere, that confession speaks eloquently that Jesus is our Lord and he is our God. That is a gift from Him.

Readings

Every year, the Easter season has us replace an Old Testament reading with a reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Now, I love the book of Acts, but I am not sure that I like this practice too much. It leaves us tending toward Marcionism, an ancient heresy that still shows up when folks say that the Old Testament is the Law and the New Testament is the Gospel. But we have the practice in the lectionary and need to make the best of it. We will want to focus on these readings as records of the earliest days of the Resurrection of movement which is Christianity. We will also want to exercise some restraint here. These passages have caused much mischief in Christian circles, especially American circles as many have mistaken description of the ancient church for a prescription of the way it is supposed to be today. (The members of the Winebrennian Restoration Movement, for instance, believed that the Lord's Supper could only be properly consumed sitting down after dark, because that was the way Jesus did it.)

Acts 4:32-35

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Of course, this is one of those passages which have caused significant mischief. I always tell my classes that as soon as someone declares themselves to be an apostle or prophet, one should probably put your hand firmly on your wallet, because that is where they are headed. This passage is a handy tool for these charlatans who try to make what is a description of what happened long ago into a prescription for what should happen today.

It appears that the first generation of Christians was convinced that the end of the world was eminent and that the resurrection, forgiveness, and fellowship of believers would usher in a totally new world order. So, they started a commune. But like all communes, this one did not take seriously the reality of sin. The whole Ananias and Sapphira incident a couple chapters later should have permanently disabused Christians from these sorts of movements, but the handful of Shakers stubbornly clinging to their commune in Sabbath Lake, Maine, bear an odd testimony to the reality that these ideas are hard to break.

The commune in Jerusalem would have some bitter consequences. It appears that it left the Christians there particularly vulnerable to a famine which would happen a few years later. It was to relieve this famine that Paul went on his third missionary journey raising funds from the Corinthians and others to bring relief to the starving Christians of Jerusalem. It was upon his return that he was arrested and his plans for a mission to Spain were put on temporary if not permanent hold.

The extension of this text also introduces us to Paul's traveling companion on the first missionary journey, Barnabas who was known as a reconciler.

Perhaps most importantly, however, is the motive for all this and the preacher who is thinking of this text wants to focus there, I would think. The Christians in Jerusalem were of one heart and soul. This moved them to radical behaviors with their property and their lives. While we might want to take a cue from the failures they encountered along the way, what we don't want to do is stifle that impulse. In fact, that impulse to the good positively expressed in the way I dispose of money and time and things is absolutely essential to the health of the person. It is the spiritual worship of which Paul speaks in his letter to the Romans. It need not take this expression in

form, but the offerings we put in the plate, the hours spent in service to others, the prayers we speak, the forgiveness we share, the commitment to one another through structures like a congregation are all ways that this is expressed. We tend to see much of this negatively, but in fact, these are occasions for the confession of Christ's lordship and divinity.

N. T. Wright argues passionately that the Christians of today have so privatized Jesus and faith that they have forgotten that the early Church heard Jesus make radical claims upon their whole lives. They were not just privately Christians, but their faith affected the way they lived every facet of their lives, including financial, political, and relational.

You may find it interesting to read the story which Luke tells us right before this. The Christians experienced persecution and prayed for boldness. They received boldness from the Spirit of God and they were bold, daring people who did things which the rest of the world thought strange. Would anyone in the secular world observe us and see anything strange or out of step with the culture in which we are called to live? Should they? What if they do? What if they don't?

Psalm 148

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

 praise him in the heights!

² Praise him, all his angels;

 praise him, all his hosts!

³ Praise him, sun and moon,

 praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens,

 and you waters above the heavens!

⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD!

 For he commanded and they were created.

⁶ And he established them forever and ever;

 he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.

⁷ Praise the LORD from the earth,

 you great sea creatures and all deeps,

⁸ fire and hail, snow and mist,

 stormy wind fulfilling his word!

⁹ Mountains and all hills,

 fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰ Beasts and all livestock,

 creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹ Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
¹² Young men and maidens together,
old men and children!
¹³ Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his majesty is above earth and heaven.
¹⁴ He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his saints,
for the people of Israel who are near to him.
Praise the LORD!

The Apostle Paul says in Colossians that in Christ God was reconciling the whole creation to himself. Notice how everything gets in the praise act here.

Also notice the occasion for the praise. God has made a decree, a promise, set in the stone of his Word. He has raised up a horn for his people. A horn was a symbol of strength. Christ has conquered, our foe is defeated. Hallelujah.

Epistle Readings in Easter:

For the balance of the Easter season we will read the first letter of John in a series. This little book is profound and most appropriate for this generation of Christianity. Theologically and stylistically it closely resembles the Gospel of John, in fact some thoughtful readers have reached the conclusion that it functions as a clarification of the Gospel for a community that misunderstood the Gospel account. In any event, a reading of John's Gospel often proves fruitful for understanding the letter. The letter is not a true letter, lacking the formula of greetings and conclusion, most likely it was meant to be heard as a sermon. The author clearly has someone in mind. II and III John seem to have been cover letters sent to the congregation and a leader in the congregation to which the sermon was addressed.

Themes: The letter has two basic themes – The first of them is incarnational. The faith which we confess must take some shape in our lives. We cannot live as if we did not believe and claim to believe. The second emphasis is on sound teaching and how to recognize it. Throughout both sections there is a strong anti-gnostic message. Jesus has come in the flesh and anyone who denies that is not only wrong, they are “anti-Christ.”

This is especially appropriate for our age as increasingly religion is compartmentalized to the private and personal life, and excluded from the public sphere as something dangerous and uncomfortable. John will not allow for that compartmentalization. What is more, as Post-modernism asserts that there is an equal validity to every belief system, John will remind us that there is still error out there. There are something that are just plain wrong and that this error is

not a matter of indifference. The arguments between the competing ideas are necessary. The peace achieved by not having that argument amounts to acquiescing to the evil of darkness.

I John 1:1-2:2

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.⁴ And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

This reading is really two readings. The first four verses are the prologue to the whole book. The second part is really the beginning of the first section of the book

The prologue establishes a couple of very important things for the whole text. First of all that the author, John, is relating things of which he knows. He has seen, heard, and touched. In light of the Gospel lesson, that is really significant as Thomas needs to touch. Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, was no ghost, but a touchable, huggable, fish-eating human being. This is contra the ideas that some were promoting at the time that no respectable divine being would so sully himself with physical human flesh as to be truly incarnate. In this line of argument it only seemed that he was a human; that was a concession made to our frail human ability to understand. This idea was and still is called “docetic” from the Greek word for seem “dokeo.” John is sure that this was no hologram, but a real person. He smelled him.

The second and equally important argument is that this Word of Life was made known to John. If you are not in fellowship with John, you have the problem, he doesn't, because he is in fellowship with God. You cannot claim to be in fellowship with God and not have fellowship with John. That is a pretty brazen claim which our American context finds very uncomfortable. We are so used to the divisions of denominations that we no longer take any offense at the idea

that we have competing claims to truth going on among Christians and we are not in fellowship with each other but we can assert that we are all in fellowship with God. John has a problem with that and if we don't have a problem with it, then we are not really reading this text.

There are a couple of answers to that. We could, as many have done, simply assert that we are the true readers of John and if you are not in fellowship with us you are not really in fellowship with God either. In that sort of a scenario only Lutherans have the truth, or if you are a Baptist, only Baptists have the truth, etc. That certainly goes against the grain of our inclusive and tolerant society. Is that the counter-cultural message we need to proclaim?

One could also take this to mean that we need to overcome the divisions of denominations by aggressively pursuing ecumenical dialogue. But that has been pursued for a century or so and not much progress has been made, if anything, the explosion of new denominations has only increased.

Others point to an "invisible" church of true believers in Jesus which transcends visible manifestation. That may be true, but it will run afoul of John as well. He has touched this truth, it is tangible and touchable. The church is not a thing of ephemera and abstracted realities. It is the body of Christ.

What will we say about this? Shall we reduce it, as most do, to simply being able to say that if you are a Methodist and you join my parish you won't have to get baptized? We will count that as a valid Christian baptism. That is where most folks are at with this today. John challenges that reductionism today. True fellowship makes joy complete, it is with John. We cannot glory in the divisions, but must repent of them.

The second part of this amazing text starts us off with the message of forgiveness. This is the signature feature of this book, John sets up tensions and resolves them. Jesus is light, no darkness there. Those who follow him walk in light, no darkness there. But there is darkness, what do we do about that? We are wholly sinners and wholly saints. Darkness is dealt with in forgiveness. We cannot simply tolerate of our sin, saying that it is just human nature. No, it is darkness, it has no place in Christ and if we are in Christ it has no place in us. We abhor the darkness, but it clings to us, so we need something to deal with it. That something is the blood of Jesus which cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

If you want to preach this text, you are really preaching the reality of Christ's resurrection in the world in which we live. Christ is active right here right now. The kingdom of God is not elsewhere, it is right here, in the forgiveness which we speak, the love which we share. Our eyes tell us that this world is filled with death and sin and destruction. Our faith points us to life and immortality as a gift from God. We live in both worlds at the same time. That tension is not something we run away from, but it is something we embrace, even finding in the tension, the angst, the tentatio of it, that we are made different by God.

One might connect it to the first reading. The resurrected Jesus significantly changed the behaviors and outlooks of the first Christians. He was real and that reality affected the living of life.

.John 20:19-31

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

²⁶ 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.” ²⁷ Then he 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.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

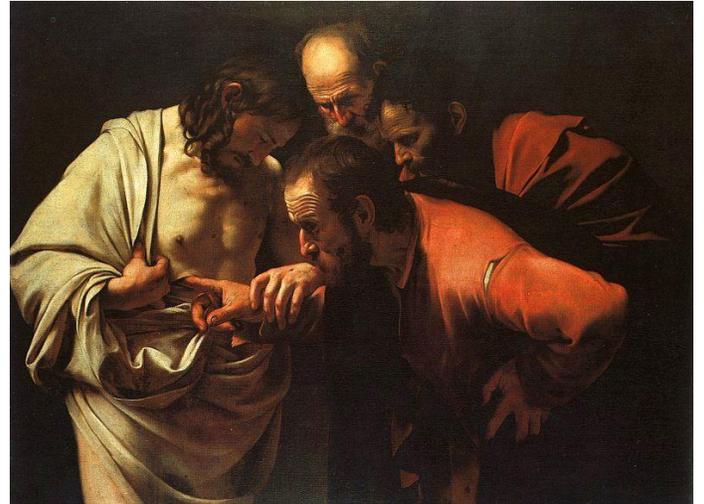
³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In the past we have preached a good sermon on this text when we noticed that Jesus says “peace be with you” two times, between those two statements of “peace” the disciples rejoiced and he showed him his wounds. In that simple order is a great message. If you look carefully at the peace of God, you will find the wounds of Christ at the center of it and profound joy as well. The peace comes from the wounds of Jesus.

Recently I was reading Augustine as he connected the blowing of the Holy Spirit here with the breathing of the breath of life into the lifeless clay of Adam in Genesis 2. This is a new creation moment. Something profound is happening as Jesus meets with these disciples. Now they are empowered to forgive sins. I have been given to visit far more congregations as a professor than I ever did as a Pastor. It has been a great deal of fun for me but one of the things I have really

come to notice is that we are uncomfortable with this. Our absolutions are often mealy mouthed when they should be bold and brazen statements. We mush around with “Jesus has died for you” as if it was a distant event, generally applied. We will find all sorts of ways to speak around this with clumsy phrasing. But Christ speaks of you forgiving sins for a specific person, the one who is standing right in front of you. When we read the “I” and “You” with “forgive” the text almost demands that these words be the total of that conversation. I can say it with the full faith and credit of God standing behind those words. He promised, when I say, he says it too, and when he says something, it means a great deal.

Many of us will be drawn to the Thomas story. It is compelling. Thomas, for some reason, was not part of the group which gathered that first Easter evening. He was not there to rejoice and receive the Spirit, as a result, he could not believe. No Spirit, no faith. “I must cast my finger into the marks on his hands, I must cast my hand into his side.” The word he uses here is strong, it is the word one uses when throwing a stone or a spear. This is what the Spirit did to Jesus when he threw Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. This is not a tentative touch, but a jab. This word is not the word of a gentle, reverent, or tentative touch.



Eight days later the disciples gather. That is a huge number for the early Christians and John seems to be reflecting some early Church worship here. They understood that they gathered on the eighth day of the week. They meant that the old creation was gone, with its repetition of seven day weeks. When they gathered on Sunday mornings, they gathered in the new kingdom, the kingdom which marked a new time, the eighth day.

Thomas is with them this time, Jesus shows up, “Peace” again is offered. This time he turns to Thomas and holds out his hands. “Touch me!” he seems to say. This is the next time that Jesus has shown himself. How does he know what Thomas has said? Is the implication that He has been there the whole time, but now, on this eighth day, he reveals himself?

I once saw a great article about Thomas as the patron saint of second chances. He blew it the first week, he messed it up badly. But Jesus would not leave him in this state. He sought him out, confronted him, acceded to his foolish, faithless demand, and pulled Thomas’ hands to his pierced side. “Stop doubting and believe!” he said.

Thomas confesses, Jesus is his God and Lord. Jesus smiles on that confession and gladly hears it but mourns that Thomas needed to see and touch. Blessed are all those who have not seen and yet believed. That’s you and me, and every generation of Christian since. The testimony of eyewitnesses was important, but it was not their eye-witnessing which makes faith, it was the

testimony, it was the Spirit which Thomas lacked, not a properly attuned will. How does one “want to believe?” One either does or does not. The will is not part of that.

John then goes on to make a statement at the end of the chapter about the whole book. Jesus did a lot of other miraculous signs but they are not recorded here. This is not a history, this is not a biography. This is not about whether the miracles happened or not, this is not even about whether Jesus was raised or not, this is about whether Jesus is the Lord he claims to be or not. In a sense this whole book is about faith, specifically your faith. That is important because in that relationship you are saved, given eternal life. When we make the Bible about facts and proving whether something happened, we are missing the point of this text. I am not against saying that it really happened, I believe it did, but the goal is always the relationship, not the historicity of the events. The right question is not whether we think it happened or not, but whether we trust him when we live and when we die.

Law

1. The resurrection seemed so long ago as to be part of another universe, applied to some other people, not to me, not to my people.
2. Just look around us. The Christian vigor and vitality that moved people to give up everything is but a distant memory. I don't even want to miss a football game to go to Church and I am the pastor!
3. I am not sure that I am not like Thomas, disbelieving the message. Do I really feel like all these other happy people on Easter morning? They seem so sure of themselves, I am full of doubts.
4. And so I couch my words carefully, qualifying everything that I say. I speak of God in the third person, never in the first or second, as if it were a description of a real conversation between me and him, between us, not the conversation itself.
5. But there is little life in such third person conversation. The news “about Jesus” does not have the power to compel, not like Jesus does, and he seems to be so far away from me.

Gospel

1. Jesus breathed on them and said, “receive the Holy Spirit.” That same Christ has touched us and bestowed that same Spirit in our Baptism. Time and space are transcended in this meal and this Word and this washing. Jesus, resurrected, living, ruling, has come to me.
2. That touch of Christ is evident, perhaps not in ways I might expect, but it still changes people. How often have I bowed my head in humble awe after visiting some simple Christian on their death bed, who smiled and looked forward to their own resurrection.

How many Christians today are not feeding the hungry, worshiping, striving against sin, and caring for the weak and needy.

3. Christ puts a confession on my lips and faith in my heart. Look not to my own heart, but to his. The real message is not whether Thomas had it right, but that Jesus did. Flesh crucified and resurrected met that trembling touch that eighth day. Take and eat, this is the body of Christ come into you to strengthen and keep you in faith.
4. And so I can say to my neighbor, “I forgive you.” I can say, “I love you.” and know that God stands behind those words. I can pray and am heard, I don’t need to pray because some other human is listening to me, I can pray because God is listening to me, with his real human ears, his face smiles when I speak those prayers.
5. And in that relationship Christ becomes my strength and my vitality. He has come this day as he came to Thomas. He has a blessing, a blessing in that we don’t see him, but in that we hear his voice, touch his water, taste his body, and we believe.

Sermon Ideas

1. On the eighth Day...Jesus came and stood among them (That the hearer would live out the new reality which is his/hers in the resurrection – forgiving and loving the neighbor.)
 - a. The death and resurrection of Christ ushered in the beginning of the end of this old tired world and the beginning of a new reality which will be all that remains when Christ rolls up the sky like a scroll and the stars fall from their heavenly places.
 - b. The old creation still hangs on, however, with its dying and sickness, its poverty and hungry, its suffering and sorrow, its sin and wickedness. We are people of both worlds and because these are so front and center for us, we often can miss the new creation.
 - c. But Christ has breathed his Spirit on us too and that means walk in a new light, a new reality. All the old creation has been redeemed by Christ and now, as citizens of that new world, we are empowered and blessed to speak the real truth about things. Sins are forgiven. Death is conquered. Sickness is banished. We are all children of God, wealthy beyond measure. Which is true? The old or the new? Both, though now our eyes see only the old, the day comes when only the new shall be seen. Blessed are those who have believed without seeing.

We live in two overlapping worlds, one of the old creation and one of the new. This sermon directs our attention to the new creation which is ours in Christ today. There is no sin which we cannot forgive, there is no hurt for which we have no balm, there no death

to which we cannot proclaim resurrection. For centuries Christians have talked about Sunday as the eighth day of the week.

Of course we know that weeks only have seven days, but that is the old creation which has a seven day week. God made for six days and rested on the seventh. But Jesus ushers in a new creation, a creation which began in me on the day someone poured water over my head and baptized me. Now I also live in a new kingdom, a new reality in which Jesus rules, in which I am immortal, in which I speak for God as his ambassador of forgiveness and love. It is not that we move between those worlds, sometimes in the old, sometimes in the new, but we are constantly and always in both. When we come to church, our joints still creak and remind us that we are getting older. When we go to the grocery store or the DMV, we are the ambassador of Christ's forgiving love there too. We worship on and live in the eighth day of the week.

2. He is faithful and just, he cleanses us from all our sins and forgives us all our unrighteousness. (Epistle – That the hearer would believe that the resurrection has demonstrated the favor of God, even for him/her.)
 - a. The Resurrection event seems so far away from us. But our Baptism has brought it near. We are the people of God.
 - b. Our old self accuses us that we are unworthy of this title. The disciples of long ago were worthy, but we are cold and indifferent people, we have not lived up to the promise, surely God has grown weary of all the disappointments which the last 20 centuries have worked.
 - c. But God is faithful and just, he cleanses and he forgives and he does not grow weary of that good work. Jesus blood was shed for the sins of the whole world. Jesus resurrection is the testimony that the cross worked. We are forgiven.

This sermon addresses the idea that we are too much like Thomas, which is true, but is that really important? Isn't the far greater truth that Jesus is faithful and just and he forgives and cleanses?

3. We proclaim the things we have touched (Epistle and Gospel –That the hearer believes Christ has touched him/her and he/she has touched Jesus and today through the relationships into which he has called us, we are instruments for him to touch others.)

Touching is a two way street, we are touched by Christ and in that touch we touch him. That was important to Thomas and John in the readings today. And it was important to Jesus too. When he said, "touch my hand, touch my side" that was a powerful thing to do. That touch would radically transform Thomas that day from a doubter to a man who would go on to be the powerful proclaimer of the resurrection in Acts. The strong legend

is that he went to India to proclaim the good news, suffering martyrdom near modern day Chennai. This Jesus has made himself present today in this assembly, here in this sacrament, in your baptism, in this fellowship of believers where we are promised today that when we speak, Jesus speaks alongside us and through us.

As Paul will often say, we are the body of Christ, connected and in mutual contact with him and one another, a holy and blessed relationship. Like Thomas we come to this morning with doubts, fears, and faith all mixed up. Christ's touch takes away his doubt and disbelief. Christ's touch is to strengthen your faith, calm your fears, quell your doubts. But this is about more than just you and making you comfortable. The Spirit poured out by Jesus will make John into the Apostle who writes these words which are intended that you believe and experience this touch of Christ as well. Now, touched by Christ, we become the fingertips of Christ in this community, to one another and to those who do not believe. We love one another and that is the presence of Christ. We can point to the good things that are happening in this congregation and say, "Christ is risen!" That is the presence, the touch of Jesus at work among.

The picture to the right is the Cathedral of St. Thomas in Chennai, India. Many years ago the bones of Thomas were brought to the Vatican, however, a finger bone is said to remain here. The very finger that touched the side of Jesus? We cannot know for certain, but it is an interesting thought.



John writes that the fellowship may be with one another and with Jesus, and that makes his joy complete. The disciples rejoice when Jesus comes, that joy connects these two readings as well.

Illustration: a child who is never touched, we have heard of these in orphanages, is emotionally stunted. Often a person in a hospital room who is afraid won't hear what you say, but that you held his or her hand can make a huge difference. Jesus touched the leper and the blind man. Ananias touches penitent Saul and the scales fall from his eyes.

4. Peace with the wounds of Christ in the middle (Gospel - That the Holy Spirit would bestow true peace upon the hearer.)

If you look at the opening of the Gospel reading carefully today, you will notice something. Jesus bestows peace on the disciples twice. He says, “Peace be with you.” Then he shows them his hands and side, they are overjoyed, and he repeats “Peace be with you.”

There are lots of ways people will promise you peace. You can go to the self-help section of any bookstore and find excellent and lousy advice on how to live peaceably with your co-workers, neighbors, spouse, and family. The protestors who agitate for this cause or against that cause are really offering peace to those who disagree with them if they just change their minds, policies, and more. The United Nations strives for peace between nations and peoples, but most of the time ends up presiding over conflicts.

The world loves the idea of peace, but most of the solutions which it offers are really just a form of coping with problems. We can agree to disagree. We can be tolerant. We can be understanding, even generous. I would not want to give the impression that I think that any of these are a bad idea and I wish that more people practiced more of these good things, but I also know that that they are not the source of real peace. The sermon wants to take the tack that the world is actually looking for a good thing, but going about it in a way which will not achieve its proper end.

Real peace starts with God, comes from Him, and it flows out of that relationship into every other relationship. Jesus bestows upon his disciples peace, real peace. And in the middle of that peace are the wounds of Christ and holy joy.

First the wounds of Christ – Every other attempt to achieve peace is built on the fact that we have to do something about people and their misdeeds and difficult behaviors. We need to cope with them somehow. But that is hard. It doesn't work. I can only strive so long to keep my temper and the like in check before the annoying, dangerous, or idiotic thing my neighbor is doing sets me off. Sometimes I cannot even understand what I am doing – I am not at peace with myself. Jesus does not ask us to do anything about this. He simply points us to his wounds. Therein lies the real answer to the sins of self and others.

This leads to the holy joy which the Disciples feel. Yes, of course, they are delighted to see their master whom they thought dead, but that joy transcends them and comes to us too. For the resurrected Jesus means that sin and death are conquered and we have been set free. Jesus alive means that we are no longer slaves to our old selves.

The peace with God, rooted in Christ's wounds, which passes our understanding and the joy which attends it does not simply remain a “Jesus and me” thing. Look at the very next verses. Jesus then commissions his disciples, you and me, to be another sort of people, a people who live in the reality of those wounds and that joy. We are forgivers. We are no longer called upon to cope with sin, but to forgive it.

That is the path to a true peace. For sins understood or scales that have been balanced through vengeance and grudge bearing, or the man who rises above these things to be tough and not let the behavior of others bother him, has not really dealt with the problem. He has coped with it. He has worked around it, like a farmer ploughing around the rocks in his fields. It can work, but it never works very well or very long. Soon comes the thing which we cannot understand, the sin which we cannot accept. Or we have found that vengeance leaves us cold and lonely, terribly right and wrong at the same time.

It is forgiveness which really deals with these things that cause our conflicts. Forgiveness sees all in the light of Christ's wounds. Forgiveness lives out a holy joy which no sin can quench. Forgiveness acknowledges that vengeance is real, but it belongs to God, not me. Forgiveness lets me simply be the bearer of a glad tidings to a broken world. I no longer have to be the one who bears the responsibility to fix it all. Forgiveness brings the real peace of Christ to me and all this world.

5. Empowered forgiveness a sermon which addresses the mechanics and empowerment of forgiveness within and outside the Christian community. This is perhaps the most powerful way to live out the confession of Christ as Lord and God. We forgive one another. Is it time to preach that sermon to your congregation? Do you know what forgiveness actually entails?
6. Jesus confronted Thomas' unbelief (Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would empower the hearer to do what Jesus does here – confront the disbelief in Christ of their neighbor.

Do you know an unbeliever or two? Likely you do. Are you bothered by that? Are you afraid of what to do in that situation, wondering if you will mess things up? Jesus treatment of Thomas is helpful. He challenges and he lets Thomas discover on his own.

Jesus was right there when Thomas first expressed his disbelief to his fellow disciples of Jesus. Jesus could have stormed in right there and set him straight. He did not. He was patient. There is a right time (Kairos) for this sort of thing. For Jesus that day would come a week later when the disciples gathered again in that upper room.

Jesus does not argue with Thomas, He begins with the relationship. He first says "Peace be with you."

Jesus shows him hands and side. He does not get into a philosophical debate about resurrection or some rational debate. He shows himself to the other. The unbeliever will not be convinced by our arguments as much as by the actions we take. He will need to see Jesus in us. We may not have holes in our hands and side, but John is pretty clear that Jesus abides in us. The person who looks at us will recognize him eventually in us. They will see him. Jesus shows Thomas the wounds which he suffered as he died for Thomas. He showed Thomas his love. It is too easy for us to be passive in this and expect that

people will just come to Jesus. We need to be active in this, we need to be showing Jesus to them intentionally and lovingly.

It is when Thomas has seen him that Jesus finally addresses the unbelief verbally. He does not really scold Thomas, he offers him the chance to see Jesus. It is only when the hands are visible and the invitation is given that Jesus exhorts him to cease disbelieving and start believing. Jesus is blunt. He simply urges Thomas to believe. There is no arguing here, there is simply a command to obey or not obey.

We need to get away from the idea that getting someone to agree with me means that this or that person has now come to faith. This puts the burden on me, making my rational arguments the vehicle for the faith to come. But a better image is that we are sowers who are planting seeds. We evangelize relationally and not informationally.

Some other interesting things about this. Disbelieving seems to be as much an activity by Thomas as believing is. It is not the case, as the world today assumes, that disbelieving is the neutral or non-active role and believing is somehow the willful and difficult “leap” which must be taken. Thomas is exerting effort to disbelieve.

The verbs here are not actually “believe” but “pisteo” or the verbal form of faith. Thomas is exhorted to “faith” in Jesus. this is much stronger than belief. Belief is propositional, faith is relational. Belief is something you can say about something you do not care about. “I believe that plane over there is headed for Chicago.” It starts to become faith when you buy the ticket, board the plane, and entrust yourself to the pilot and crew to deliver safely there instead of St. Louis or some other city. Jesus is not asking Thomas to check off a mental box in which he now says, “OK, I guess Jesus really did rise from the dead.” He is asking Thomas to entrust himself wholly to this new reality. Jesus has conquered Thomas’ death as well. This is why Thomas uses the loaded term, “My Lord and my God” which no pious Jew could ever say to a human being. But he says it here.

We thought that this sermon might be a good way to address some of the issues that saw in the opening page of these notes. This is a way to describe the meaningfulness of life. We are the very hands and feet of Christ. That has meaning. People see Jesus in us. That is purpose. That is a life which is in itself holy because God is in it. I don’t need to find meaning for my life or despair of meaning in my life. God has given it by pouring Jesus into my life in Baptism and Sacrament.