

Easter 2, April 11, 2021 (Jn 20:19-31; Ps 133; Acts 4:32-35); I John 1:2-2:2) SERMON

The holy gospel according to John, the 20th chapter (20:19-31)

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

This is the gospel of our Lord.

Greetings, friends! I am Dorcas, the twin sister of Thomas. Your Pastor asked me to tell you that I am totally and completely a figment of her imagination. The Bible says nothing at all about Thomas's siblings—only that he was known as "Thomas," which means *twin* in Aramaic. He was also called "Didymus," which means *twin* in Greek. Your Pastor has taken poetic license with this sermon, trying to give you a sense of the feelings and attitudes of all of us who had followed and grieved for Jesus.

Let me take you back now, to **the first day of the week**, the **third day** after Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried. Can you imagine the fear and shame we all felt as we hid behind locked doors? Only hours before, Mary Magdalene had come bursting in among us, trembling. **I have seen the Lord!** she cried out.

Well, of course she had. She had gone to the tomb in the garden for that very purpose, to see the body of Jesus, to say her final good-bye to the Teacher we loved so dearly. But what she told us next was unbelievable: he *talked* to her! He was *alive* again!

How could that be? we wondered. He had *died* on the cross on Friday. Mary Magdalene herself had seen him die. Of course, ten of the disciples hadn't seen that—they'd all run away, fleeing in fear for their own lives when he was arrested after the Passover meal. (Except, of course, for Peter, who did something *worse* than flee—he actually denied, *three times*, that he even *knew* Jesus.)

So how could Jesus be alive on Sunday when he was dead on Friday? If he was really walking the streets of Jerusalem, how could the disciples bear to face him after all they had done? and after all they *hadn't* done?

Do you realize that Mary Magdalene was the *first evangelist*? She was the very first person to tell the Good News: Jesus, the Son of God, had been raised from the dead! Part of that Good News is contained in the words he said to her: **Go to my brothers and sisters and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.**

And yet, even after hearing that *Good News*, the disciples were still prisoners of their own fears and guilt, still in the Upper Room behind locked doors.

But what happened that very evening had *nothing* to do with their shame! All at once, **Jesus came and stood among them.** Not only that—his first words to them were almost as astonishing as his presence! **Peace be with you.**

He didn't say, *How could you deny me, Peter?* He didn't ask, *Why didn't you come looking for me when Mary told you she'd seen me?* He didn't criticize. He didn't condemn. He just gave them his peace, not once, but *twice*—he gave them his own peace that passes all understanding.

Close your eyes for a moment and picture yourself in that small Upper Room: Jesus has broken into the fear and shame of ten of his closest friends—all of whom have betrayed him.

Picture yourself sitting on a cushion in a corner, huddling close to the wall, wrapped in shame and guilt, confused by the words Mary said to you that morning. And listen to the voice of the Savior who died in your place three days ago: **Peace be with you. . . .**

Now open your eyes and listen carefully to the next words of Jesus: **As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.**

I'm here to tell you how important this is! Jesus came into the world to *reconcile the world to himself*. He came to destroy the power of sin by doing away with guilt and shame—because perhaps the greatest power of sin is how it twists our thinking and believing. We know God has a perfect right to condemn us, to hold all our sins against us. But Jesus taught us that God is so eager to *forgive* us, those sins are wiped away before we even ask, as soon as we repent. And he wants *us* to share this gift of forgiveness with everyone.

Oh dear, I've digressed from the story of that first evening, from my brother Thomas. He wasn't present when Jesus appeared; he'd gone out to be alone with his grief and shame. The other disciples surrounded him with joy when he returned. **We've seen the Lord!** they told him, over and over again. *He's alive! He gave us his peace! He's forgiven us!*

But like Mary's message that morning, *their* words fell on deaf ears. Thomas couldn't, or wouldn't, believe. He wanted to be sure the man they said was now *living* was the same man who'd been dead.

Thomas wanted some assurance that Jesus might after all be able to fulfill the promises he'd made during his lifetime. Before giving himself completely to *this Lord*, he wanted to be sure Jesus really did have power over death—not only his *own* death, but Thomas's, too.

If Jesus was to be the Lord of Thomas's *life*, he had to prove that Thomas need have no fear of *death*. That's why Thomas refused to believe without proof. But as soon as Jesus invited him to reach out his hand and touch his deadly wounds, Thomas's *unbelief* turned to an unwavering conviction that this was, indeed, his Lord and his God.

Just *seeing* Jesus and hearing his voice convinced him that his whole life and death, his entire present and future, were secure in the hands of his risen Lord. And Jesus' words to Thomas are for us today: **You believe because you've seen me. Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe.**

Sisters and brothers in Christ, *you* are among those Jesus spoke of. You haven't seen him, but you have come to believe. You have *reached out and touched* Jesus—and even better, when he comes to you in his Holy Supper, *he* touches you from the inside out, renewing the gifts of his Holy Spirit received when you were baptized. When you gather together for worship, you are his body, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.

Like the physical body of Jesus, you too bear wounds, some of them deadly. But, dear Christian friends, Jesus bears them with you! And he sends you forth to live out *love* instead of *rejection*, *forgiveness* instead of *condemnation*. *As the Father sent Jesus, Jesus now sends you.*

And that is my message: Go and tell! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed, alleluia!**