

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, April 24, 2022

2nd Sunday of Easter/Year C

First Reading: Acts 5:27-32

Second Reading: Revelation 1:4-8

Gospel Reading: John 20:19-31

Sermon Title: “Do Not Doubt But Believe!”

Theme

The unprecedented events of the day of resurrection continue as the risen Jesus appears to his fearful disciples. A week later, after Thomas worships Jesus, Jesus pronounces that the blessings of the resurrection are also for those who “have not seen and yet believe.”

Text

First Reading: Acts 5:27-32

²⁷When they had brought [the apostles,] they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” ²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Second Reading: Revelation 1:4-8

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds;

every eye will see him,

even those who pierced him;

and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Gospel: John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

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

Sermon

Today's Gospel Reading is easily broken down into three distinct parts, and Kaari printed it that way in the bulletin too, so it is easy to see.

The first part is the account of Jesus' first appearance to his disciples on Easter evening. According to John's Gospel, Mary was the only one who had seen the risen Lord Jesus that morning until the event of the first part of today's Gospel Reading. We heard that early morning account and Mary's encounter with the risen Lord Jesus as our Easter Gospel Reading last weekend. You will recall that Jesus told her to go to his disciples, his "brothers," and tell them that he will be ascending. She did as he requested and when she found them she announced, ¹⁸"I have seen the Lord!"

John didn't tell us how the disciples responded to this good news. Other gospel renderings indicate that they did not believe her. Who could blame them? Oh, and they were distracted by another concern – the more urgent concern was that they were afraid that the mob that killed Jesus was out to round them up and do the same to them!

The disciples were in hiding behind locked doors and windows when Jesus appeared before them and said, ^{19b}"Peace be with you." They must have wondered if they were seeing things! Or was he a ghost, after all, several of them saw his lifeless body come off the cross and be buried. To allay their concern, Jesus showed them his wounds and that seemed to satisfy them, and they rejoiced! Again he said, "Peace be with you" and then he breathed on them the Holy Spirit.

The second part is the story of Thomas, yes, doubting Thomas. Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared and so his position was ^{25b}"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week went by. Where was Jesus? I'm so glad you asked. I don't know! But a week later, the disciples were gathered again in the same house, and Jesus appeared again and greeted them the same way, "Peace be with you." And then he went right to Thomas and said, ²⁷"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas 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 come to believe.”

Wow! What a powerful moment! I wish I would have been there!

And *the third part* is a two-sentence epilogue to John's resurrection account that includes an important passage: ³¹these (signs) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. You see, John was a first-hand eye-witness, and he knew that in the years to come, his eye-witness account would be important as his testimony to what he experienced. And so he wrote what he experienced so that we may believe that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Thomas gets a bad rap even today, some two-thousand years after he did what many a right-minded person would do. I mean, apart from near-death experiences or medical deaths followed by resuscitation, no one has been brought back from the dead, and especially to never die again. That is what Jesus did, something that no one else has ever done before or since.

Especially because we are not first-hand eye-witnesses to the resurrection, something that happened two thousand years ago, I think it can be difficult for us to believe too. So there I just said it for you. I didn't say, I don't believe in the resurrection, the fact is I do whole-heartedly. I just said that because we are not first-hand eye-witnesses it can be difficult for us to believe too.

As an aside, when I find it difficult to believe, I just stop myself from over-intellectualizing it and simply choose to believe. And that is at Jesus' encouragement. He spoke of the virtue of *faith like a child* (Matthew 18:1-5). So I simply choose to believe it because, without it, I'm lost. There is nothing else. It is that simple, and I encourage you to take that approach too, because, as Paul wrote in Romans, ^{Romans 6:4b} "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

You see, those who believe that Jesus is the Christ and resurrected from the dead will experience a resurrection like his. To be clear, because we believe that Jesus is

the Christ, our reward for belief is our resurrection like his; life eternal with God. I can only imagine what that will be like, but I know it's going to be amazing.

Belief, faith is like a muscle that we exercise at all moments of our lives. Some events, like the car trip into church for worship service, probably require little faith. Other events like a doctor's appointment, a surgery, or concern for a loved one are more intense – sometimes a lot more intense. It is in those times that we must rely on our faith, or as Jesus said, "Do not doubt but believe."

Now, I'm not going to stand before you as a charlatan and tell you that if you just have faith and believe that everything is going to go well. *Everything will not go well!* We are mortal human beings. We are all going to die at some point. That is not a surprise. Faith's response to all the moments of our lives is, "God's got this." Or as Jesus said, "Do not doubt but believe." Believe that, come what may, God in Christ has our best interests in mind. Any particular moment may indeed turn out well for us, or it may not - in our human understanding. But in faith, ^{Romans 8:28}"We know that all things work together *for good* for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

You know, I've often daydreamed about what it must have been like that first Easter morning. What a blessing it would have been to be there and see the risen Lord Jesus Christ alive and well! To have my disbelief blown away by seeing his nail-scarred hands and feet and side, the way Thomas' was. How easy it would be to believe then! No wonder his disciples were able to do such great works in the post-resurrection era!

But that is not what Jesus said. He said, ^{29b} "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That is us! We are blessed because we have not seen and yet believe. The same Holy Spirit Jesus breathed into his disciples has been given to us. Most of the time, I think we don't believe we have it, and so like that faith muscle, we don't exercise it.

So in the inconsequential moments of our lives, "Do not doubt but believe. Blessed are you because you have not seen and believe." And in the most consequential

moments of our lives, "Do not doubt but believe. Blessed are you because you have not seen and believe."

In all moments of our lives, we must believe that God in Christ is working on our behalf. And even when the worst possible outcome happens, we still believe that God will make something unimaginably good out of it. "Do not doubt but believe."

Prayer

Living God and our Heavenly Father, as the Risen Lord Jesus entered that locked up house where his disciples hid, may your living Word enter into us by the power of your Holy Spirit so that we who have not seen may yet believe. We pray this in his name. Amen