

**John 20:19-31**  
Easter 2 + April 28, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
A Savior Risen to Give

The Word of the Lord from John 20:29: Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Fear and doubt, peace and forgiveness. That's our Gospel lesson on the Sunday after Easter.

The disciples are the ones with the fear and the doubt. They're locked in a room out of fear, because they don't believe Jesus is risen, but they do believe that they're next on the list of those to be killed. They should know better: they've heard that Jesus is risen. But they doubt, so they fear.

Thomas is the whipping-boy when it comes to doubt: nobody ever talks about "Doubting Thaddeus," who gets off scot-free all the time. Thomas is the one who misses Jesus' first appearance to the disciples and then doesn't believe them. But maybe we should call him "Honest Thomas" instead: Thomas isn't a bigger doubter than the other ten. He just gets singled out because he wasn't there when Jesus appeared to the rest. When Jesus says to him, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed," His words apply to the others. In fact, He speaks less to rebuke Thomas and the other ten, and more to bless you. You haven't seen, but faith comes by hearing. You haven't seen, but you believe; so Jesus says, "Blessed are you."

Good thing, because you're going to struggle with fear and doubt. Know that, because there will be some yayhoos out there who tell you that you only have faith when you have no doubt – so that if you have doubts, you don't believe enough to be saved. That's utterly false: as long as you're both saint and sinner, you're going to have both faith and doubt. That's why you rejoice that, when Jesus died for all of your sins, He died for all of your doubts and your fears.

Jesus helps fearful, doubting types like the disciples. He comes and stands among them – and locked doors don't stop the one who's just broken out of the grave. He stands among them, and He doesn't rebuke them. He says, "Peace be with you."

That's a word of absolution, of forgiveness. It's a word to strengthen faith. If they're left to themselves, imagine the accusing thoughts of the disciples when Jesus stands in their midst – their teacher whom they abandoned in His greatest hour of need. For all they know, He could be back for vengeance, because fearful sinners always think that God is out to get them. It makes sense, then, that the disciples are glad to see Jesus *after* He's said, "Peace be with you."

In other words, "You and I are at peace. We wouldn't be if your sins were still bound to you. Your doubts and your fears would be enough to make you unholy, and then I'd have to condemn you. But I've borne all your sins, doubts and fears included, to the cross; I've paid the price for them. They're gone and you're redeemed, so we're at peace.

That's Good News. Jesus is risen from the dead, and He does not hold their sins against them.

Or against anyone else! This is Good News for all to hear. The Lord wants to make this news known to all nations; and in His wisdom and will, He is going to give His people the privilege of making it happen.

He starts with these disciples, the guys who have been hiding in a room. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

We should stop and ponder those words for a minute. Jesus tells His people that, on His authority, the task of the Church is to forgive sins. That sounds simple enough, and let's illustrate it a little bit. Jesus also gives His apostles the authority to heal people of physical diseases. So, for instance, Peter and John meet a lame beggar outside of the temple in Acts 3. Peter says to the man, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" (Acts 3:6) Note that Peter doesn't say, "In the name of Peter, rise up and walk!", because Peter doesn't have power to heal people. Jesus does, and Peter is speaking on His authority. When Peter speaks to the lame man, it's as if he is saying, "I'm here to say what Jesus would say to you if He were standing here; and Jesus says to you, 'Rise up and walk!'" It's Jesus' words through Peter's mouth; and because it's Jesus' words, the man is healed.

In the absolution at the start of today's service, I said, "I, by virtue of *my office*, as a called and ordained *of the Word*, announce the grace *of God* unto all of you; and *in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ*, I forgive you all of your sins *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*." I didn't say, "I forgive you in the name and by the authority of Tim." I have no power to forgive sins. If I forgave you in the name of Tim, it wouldn't get you into heaven, but it would send me toward hell. Pastors forgive in the name of Jesus, because the Lord alone has the power to forgive sins, because He's the One who died to conquer sin, death and devil.

It's important to explain this, because many get it wrong.

There will occasionally be a visitor here who is deeply offended by the absolution. Every now and then we get a comment along the lines of, "Who does the pastor think he is to forgive sins?" I'll be honest: I'm nobody. I wear a robe to hide as much of me as possible, because I don't matter. I'm here to be a mouth, to say what Jesus says. And to repentant sinners, Jesus says, "I forgive you all of your sins." That's what the absolution is: Jesus' words through a pastor's lips; but because they're Jesus' words, they actually take sins away.

The Word of God, not the pastor, does the work: while the pastor is called publicly to preach and administer the sacraments, it's not just pastors who can speak forgiveness. If a three-year-old girl says, "Jesus forgives you," that's Jesus' words on her lips, and that word takes away the sins of repentant sinners.

Of course, Jesus also speaks to those who don't repent. He says, "As long as you're holding onto that sin, you're not forgiven." That's given to us to say, too, when we come across those who will not repent: "As long as you don't repent, you're not forgiven." We'll get a similar objection from these folks too: "Who are you to judge me?" The answer, "I'm no one. I'm just telling you what Jesus says. He's the One coming to judge the living and the dead; but before He does, He's already died for your sin so that you don't have to. Repent and live!"

Forgiving sins. That's what the risen Jesus is all about, because forgiveness brings peace with God and everlasting life. Jesus is not risen to bind sins: the Lord takes no delight in the death of the wicked. However, He will not force anyone to be forgiven if they do not so desire.

We should take this opportunity to speak of private confession and absolution. We retain private confession as a blessing, not a requirement. It *is* a blessing, and here's why: for one thing, you will commit some sins along the way that especially haunt you, badly enough so that you can hear the absolution in church and think, "That was for everybody but me." For another, you and I have a great capacity to lie to ourselves about sin and forgiveness. We can lie to ourselves that a sin wasn't a sin at

all, or that it's so great as to be unforgivable. We can lie to ourselves that we're forgiven when we haven't repented, or that we're not forgiven when we have. Because we have such a capacity to lie to ourselves, it is a great blessing to hear God's Word from somebody else.

Private confession is for repentant Christians, especially those haunted by a specific sin. There is, in part, a great relief to confessing a sin like that out loud and find that you haven't been struck down: sins held secret have a great power to own you, but a lot of that disappears when it's not a secret anymore. But that relief of confessing is a little thing compared to the blessing of absolution: the pastor put his hands on your head and says, "In the stead and by the command of Christ, I forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." There's no chance of thinking that Jesus was talking to somebody else. It was for you, because Jesus died and rose again to forgive you.

If Jesus died and rose again to forgive you, then His Church should always be about the forgiveness of sins.

I've mentioned that many are offended by this message because they don't understand that it is Jesus speaking through His people. There is another danger, though: many within Christendom argue that the Church shouldn't be about the forgiveness of sins, because forgiveness is an irrelevant message to the world. If the Church is to be relevant, it should switch to a different message about social justice, equality, better living or something that resonates with the culture.

But Jesus didn't breathe on His disciples and say, "end discrimination" or "fight for tolerance" or "manage your finances better" or "eat better food." Such struggles will always go on in the world, with all sorts of people in the fight. The Church has the forgiveness of sins to give; and if the Church stops giving it, nobody else will.

Besides, the whole "relevance" argument is silly anyway. On the one hand, should we really be surprised that unrepentant sinners don't want to hear about sin and forgiveness? It is hardly breaking news that the Gospel does not resonate in the world. On the other hand, the world needs to hear nothing more than it needs to hear of sin and forgiveness in Christ. There is nothing more relevant than life for the dying, whether the dying know it or not; and because everyone has a conscience, deep down they know.

As long as this dying world continues, the Church will be as welcome as the women returning from the tomb – speaking the best news ever and dismissed as a silly girl that doesn't know what she's talking about. But you? You know better, and this is your joy:

The risen Jesus says, "Peace be with you," because your sins were washed away in your baptism.

The same Jesus, who showed Thomas His hands and His side, does you one better: He gives you His own body and blood. You don't see, but you believe. Blessed are you.

The same Jesus continues to shepherd you by His Word, bidding you to repentance and speaking His grace. It is why He has died, why He is risen; and now that He has made us His people, He gives us the joy and privilege of speaking that forgiveness to all.

Fear and doubt replaced by peace and forgiveness. That's our text for the Sunday after Easter. I'm sure then that it's a great mystery how this sermon is going to end: rejoice, my friends, for the risen Lord speaks peace to you and says, "I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen