

BELIEVING IN THE RISEN SON OF GOD
John 20:19-31; Easter 2; April 10-11, 2021

P Alleluia! Christ is risen!

C He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

The Second Sunday of Easter is popularly known as “Thomas Sunday” for obvious reasons. We hear about how the Apostle Thomas’ refused that first Easter evening to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead unless he personally could see and touch the living flesh of Christ. A week later, Thomas got his wish. **Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 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.” Thomas answered Him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**

It’s not hard to understand why this account was included in the Gospel of John. While many people did see and believe in the risen Lord Jesus Christ in the early church, especially in the 40 days between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, some whom St. Paul names in 1 Corinthians 15, ever since then almost all Christians have come to faith in Jesus without seeing Him in the flesh. Faith in Jesus does not need visible proof that He is alive, otherwise the Church would not exist today. What then is needed to have faith? St. John tells us. **Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 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.**

Faith in Jesus does not depend on seeing and touching Him in the flesh. Jesus admonished Thomas for demanding that in order to believe. Faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ (Rom. 10:17) as recorded in John’s Gospel and the rest of the Bible, God’s Word. This faith is that God’s Son Jesus Christ has come in the flesh to save us by His dying and rising, that He is present with us in the Church by His Holy Spirit, and that He still comes among us physically and is given into our mouths in the Sacrament of His body and blood. This is our Christian faith.

St. John says that this faith means **having life in Jesus' name**. What is life in Jesus' name? It is sharing in the life of Jesus Christ Himself. Our sin and unbelief separated us from the living God, which is most clearly shown by our mortality, our weakness that always leads to our deaths. Those who are sinners die, but God wants us to have life, life in Him. So He sent His Son Jesus in the flesh of mankind to take our sin and death into His own human body to suffer and die on the cross to destroy the power of sin and death in us. Easter is about Christ's victory over sin and death in His body, who is raised from the dead in His body, a victory that He shares with us by faith in Him and in His name.

The expression "**in His name**" points us toward the promises of God in Holy Baptism of being washed clean of our sins in its water and Word and receiving God's name as our own. Baptism is not a ritual in which we identify ourselves with God by our promises of faithfulness to Him. Baptism rather is God identifying Himself with us sinners in Jesus Christ, God washing away our sins in the blood Jesus, and God claiming us as His own children. The sign that we are God's children is that He puts His name on us when He baptizes us: **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**. It is not only that we are baptized "**in**" that name, that is, using that name in Holy Baptism, but that by that name we are brought "**into**" fellowship with God by becoming members of His family, children of God.

Being baptized into God's name, we believe that we now share in the life of God through God's Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus blessed His disciples with His **Peace** each time He came among them. "**Peace be with you!**" The life that God shares with us through His Son is one of peace, especially as we live in this world that is driven by fear.

On that first Easter night, even after word of Jesus' resurrection from the dead had come to the disciples, they were still locked up, hiding in fear that what happened to Jesus might still happen to them. Jesus had forewarned them that what His enemies did to Him they would do to His disciples. The problem that the disciples had was that they were so afraid of what the world could do to them that they stopped trusting in the God who had already saved them from all that the world could do to them. They were in disbelieving fear of suffering and dying, so the living Jesus came to give them God's peace to live in faith.

This faith in Jesus and His forgiveness is the work of God the Holy Spirit. **[Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”** What is this **forgiveness of sins**, and on what is forgiveness based?

The peace we have in the Church has as its foundation the forgiveness of our sins, but when I ask Christians to explain forgiveness they often struggle to put it into their own words. In the confession of sins at the beginning of each Divine Service we admit that we are sinful, admitting that our sins are committed against God and each other “in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone,” and we ask in faith for God to forgive our sins. What are we asking for, and what is God giving us?

Since God has made us and all creatures, He decides what is good and right and what it means to go against Him and His will for us. In case we don't know what God wants He has given us in writing His perfect law in the Ten Commandments as well as created in our hearts a conscience to bother us when we violate God's will, though our consciences are not perfect since they have been corrupted by sin and can be overridden or ignored.

Sin is violating God's law by not giving God what we owe Him in our relationship with Him and our neighbors, those God has placed around us and to whom we are responsible to love and care for. So sin is like a debt we owe. We have taken what belongs to God and used it for our own purposes, not God's, and it is now used up and gone. And God demands what is His and we don't have it to give, like owing a debt without the means to pay it back. That's one way to understand our sins: owing God but not being able to pay.

Forgiveness of sin describes how what we owe God is paid back. **Jesus came and stood among [His disciples] and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side.** What did they see in His hands and side? The marks from the nails of the cross and the wound of the spear after Jesus died. The price of the forgiveness of our sins is the suffering and death of Jesus Christ in human flesh and blood. Jesus paid our debt.

Some people wonder how the death of one man, Jesus Christ, could pay for the sins of the whole world. If Jesus were only a good man, His suffering and death could not pay for all of us. But Jesus is not only the Son of Mary and fully human, but Jesus is also the Son of God and fully God. God the Father sent His only Son into the flesh of man to take our sins on Himself, suffer and die with them in our place on the cross, and pay in full the debt we owe God. We believe that God accepted Jesus' sacrifice in our place because Jesus rose from the dead.

Rising from the dead, Jesus remains true man, as can be seen when He showed His disciples His hands and side which still had the marks of the nails and spear from His suffering and death. And risen from the dead and living and reigning for all eternity, we believe that Jesus is also God's Son and true God with His Father and the Holy Spirit. We trust that God accepts the payment of His Son and forgives our sins because Jesus rose from the dead. He is our peace with God.

You might have noticed that “**peace**” is a key word in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. After hearing the Words of Our Lord that consecrate the bread and wine to be His body and blood, we hear the greeting Jesus gave His disciples on the night after He rose from the dead, the *Pax Domini*, the “Peace of the Lord be with you always.” In case there might be some confusion over where this peace comes from, we have the tradition of the pastor holding up the consecrating bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ, given and shed on the cross and now risen from the dead.

Then we sing the *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God, to Jesus who took away our sins and the sins of the world, ending by asking Jesus to “grant us peace,” as He did to His disciples on Easter evening. We sing this because we believe that the risen Son of God comes and stands among us – not so we can see Him like the disciples could – but in His body and blood as the Lamb of God. We receive God's peace from Him, along with the forgiveness of sins, by eating and drinking His risen body and blood with the bread and wine. And after we have eaten and drunk the Supper, we are sent back into the world with Jesus' blessing, “Depart ✠ in peace.” The sign of the cross with this blessing reminds us that our peace with God is based on Jesus who died on the cross but rose to stand among us in forgiveness.

After we have received Jesus' body and blood, the response of faith is, "Amen," which is a thankful "Yes!" The risen Jesus Christ has come among us in His flesh and blood to save us from our sin and death. Though we have not been able to see and touch His risen hands and side, the Holy Spirit has given us true faith to confess with the now believing Thomas, "**My Lord and my God!**" "**...Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**" Amen.

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