

“More Than Just Belief”
Sermon delivered 4-11-10
Immanuel Lutheran Church
Neal Collins, Pastor

John 20:19–31

When 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."²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."²² 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 retain the sins of any, they are retained."²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, 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 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."²⁶ A 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."²⁷ Then 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."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 come to believe."³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.³¹ But 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.

Easter Again!

Today is Easter Sunday! (Pause) Yes, we did celebrate Easter Sunday last Sunday - with the Champagne and with standing room only -celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I do mean what I said, Easter is celebrated whenever we are gathered in the name of God, the Word read and proclaimed, and the sacraments celebrated. Our Gospel this morning addresses “Easter” as being daily occurrence in our lives.

The story of Thomas appears the Sunday following “Easter”. Over the years I have mistakenly put the emphasis in my sermons on contrasting belief with doubt. We all leave feeling good because we are not like Thomas because we _____, believe. What a tragedy to take the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and boil it down to believing or not believing in him. So, we believe, and go to heaven, and don't go to hell. When we do this, we separate Jesus from his message. When we do this, we put the focus on the belief that Jesus is God's son's, born of the virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and on the third day he rose from the dead. This is fine for a beginning, but a terrible ending.

The Story

So, let us track the story. The disciples are behind locked doors, on Easter night, I trust they weren't drinking champagne and high five-ing each other over the events of the day. They were scared of the Judean authorities. When John writes about the Jews, he means those in authority. As a matter of fact, earlier in the day a couple of them went to the tomb, where they could have been spotted by Roman or Jewish authorities at any time. They were afraid of encountering the one they denied and abandoned. Why else would Jesus greet them with "Peace be with you"? Probably more than fear, they were ashamed at what they did by abandoning Jesus. Remember Peter's famous line of never abandoning Jesus and the cock crowing?

Backstage

Last year, (I am sure you remember what I said, last year, ha!) I quoted St. Garrison Keillor, who gives us a way relating and understanding Peter and the others with his words on shame "We always have a backstage view of ourselves. We let the audience see only the neatly arranged stage. But behind the curtain, all kinds of things are lying around, old failures, hurts, guilt and shame....Shame plagues our soul...when our fantasies about who we would like to be encounters the backstage of who we really are."

Peace to You

In the midst of this shame, Jesus says "Peace to you". This does not refer to inner peace, but refers to the space between people. Jesus will say this three times through our Gospel this morning. This is the first thing, according to John, Jesus says to his disciples, and because of the resurrection, to us. His first words are not about believing, but about "peace being with us." Peace is in the space around you. Peace is yours. Look at everything you are facing this morning. Take a deep breath, and hear these first words of the resurrected Jesus, "Peace to you." Jesus says nothing about the backstage reality of their world, or our world, but only this present moment. "Peace to you".

After saying this, he commissions them; Jesus is sending them out as the Father sent him saying "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathes on them and says "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." This is John's Easter/Pentecost story that happens on Easter Day as opposed to the Day of Pentecost. This event transforms the disciples from being fear-based to having a mission - being sent into the world as God sent Jesus, and as we are sent.

Whoa, slow down a minute, how did you jump all those hurdles from Jesus appearing, to the disciples behind locked doors, to saying "Peace to you", to me being sent into the world? Wait; time out, slow down... isn't Christianity about believing Jesus is the Son of God? What is all this other stuff?

Sent by God

On the one hand, we can say Jesus appeared to the disciples and Thomas as evidence of his resurrection, but there is more. The *more* is the breath of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, and the sending them out. If this didn't happen then we wouldn't be here this morning. As Brian Stroffogen says, "Easter is not about coming to a wonderful inspiring worship service (with pretty music and an entertaining homily), but about being sent back into a Good Friday world filled with systems that are life deprecating, as opposed to life giving." We are empowered by the Spirit of God that continues to breathe on the

disciples, and on YOU. To be sent, as Jesus was sent, is not to condemn this Good Friday world, but is done in order that the world might be saved through YOU. Saved - meaning having life, the fullness of life.

Have we backed up enough? The Holy Spirit breathes on you, you are sent with the peace of God for saving the world. God continues to work in the world through you, as he did in Jesus and the disciples. You thought it was just about believing in Jesus and his resurrection, but it is about so much more.

Faith

Faith is more than just believing that Jesus is the Son of God, or that he was raised by God. Faith is about the power of God acting in our lives - by forgiving the sins of others, not so much in a moral fashion, but in the life giving fashion of God's love for the world. The world you live in, move in, and have your being in. God is the "ground of your being" in a Good Friday world.

None of us are immune from this Good Friday world, apart from the Holy Spirit breathing upon us. This Good Friday world is a world, as understood by Henri Nouwen, in *The Way of the Heart*. He refers to taking the message of Jesus' "Peace to You" as sending you out, sending you out as Jesus and the disciples were sent out into the world. The world you and I are sent out into is a tough world, shaped by busyness, compulsivity and greed. In our world, people's lives are lived in a superlative fashion. There just isn't enough time to have it all and do it all.

Forget?

We, as children of the light on Sunday, often forget on Monday who we are. We compulsively buy into the Good Friday agenda's question of "Who am I?" The response of a Good Friday world is, how are we being perceived? We forget we are sent. Perception is everything... if busyness is important; we are busy... if money is important then we must make our claim, if popularity is important then we need a lot of people as friends on our Facebook page.

Nouwen says, "These compulsions are the basis of two main enemies of the spiritual life, namely anger and greed." What else is anger if not the impulsive response to the experienced of being deprived? When our sense of self depends on what we can acquire, greed flares up. Greed and anger are brothers and sisters, dominating an unredeemed world.

Baptized

This morning, we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. This morning, as we pray for the Holy Spirit to breathe on this child, we recall the purpose of our own Baptism - to be workers in the Kingdom of God. Christ continues to breathe on you, sends you with a message and lifestyle of love for the world, as God loves the world.

My prayer, for this child, and for us, is that we see the Gospel of Jesus Christ as being more than just belief in Jesus and the God who raised him from the dead. This being the Holy Spirit, who continues breathe in our lives so we may live and be the message of the Jesus, sent into world as love and forgiveness.