

Fear Not...I am the Resurrection and the Life

April 24, 2022

Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

Pastor David Labuhn

What picture does St. John paint for us with his words in the Gospel reading this morning? What emotions and mindsets does he present to us by the inspiration of God? We are told that even after one week, the disciples are still in hiding. Even after, hearing the reports that Jesus is alive, they still lack the courage to venture out of their locked room, their prison of despair. Even, after seeing Jesus, they are still immobilized and unable to move on with their lives.

At the beginning of the reading, we are told that the disciples were in hiding, even on the very day of the resurrection after it had been reported to them by the women and Peter and John who ran out to the empty tomb and even after Jesus himself came to them in their self-imposed confinement. Even after Jesus said, ***"Peace be with you,"*** - Peace means that they were forgiven for their behavior. Even after Jesus commissioned them, gave them their next assignment as His disciples, and even after He gave them the awesome power to forgive sins in His name. Even after all this they stayed in that room – they remain immobilized – they remained traumatized and fearful. They were stuck in the past and unable to move forward into the future, even in the direction of their living Savior and Redeemer, Jesus, Himself.

Think about these men. They were not sophisticated and not well-educated but they had been with Jesus for three years. That is a long time to spend with someone in a close and intimate relationship. They had heard His words, His preaching, and His teaching. He had very plainly told them on no less than three occasions, according to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, what was coming. Jesus said, ***“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.”*** The last time He made that statement was while they were on the way to Jerusalem where it would happen. The Gospel of John does not quote Jesus saying these words but recalls the story of Moses raising the serpent in the wilderness and his parable of the seed dying, falling to the ground, being buried, and then rising to produce new life.

The Gospel writers tell us (tell on themselves really) that each time Jesus predicted His arrest, death, and resurrection, the disciples in some way or another manifest their incomprehension, and Jesus uses the occasion to teach them new things. It makes me think of how I would tell my children a great truth and they would ignore it or couldn't comprehend it. Then, when it came to pass, they were shocked that what I had told them really happened as I had predicted. Jesus often referred to His disciples as children.

Everything that Jesus had predicted happened and now they were in shock and dismay. Jesus told them that one of their own would betray Him and it happened. Later, that disciple was so consumed with guilt that he committed suicide. Jesus told them that one of them would deny Him not once, but three times, and it happened. Peter, the denier, was in that room and was probably consumed with guilt. All of them abandoned Jesus. Only one of them came to the site of the crucifixion, John. Fear of being caught by Jesus' enemies and executed like Jesus wasn't the only reason His disciples were in hiding. Shame and fear for how they had behaved (had misbehaved) may have driven them to hide from Jesus too. Not unlike how Adam and Eve hid from God when they committed the first sin. Not unlike when children hide after doing something wrong. Not unlike us when we sin. They had been told that Jesus was alive. The women and two of their own brothers, Peter and John, gave them the news. And Jesus Himself had appeared to them. He couldn't be contained by locked and barred doors. How would you have felt (maybe you have felt) having to face Jesus after betraying Him?

And yet, we are told they were glad Jesus had come to them. Maybe they were glad that Jesus was not dead. Maybe they remembered His words to them about rising on the third day. But that could not undo the wrongs that were heavy on their consciences. The guilt they felt could only be undone by Jesus Himself. And Jesus showing the mercy and grace of God, forgave

them. He did so in two words. He said, ***“Shalom alekhem”*** a common greeting meaning ***“Peace be with you.”*** But this greeting was more than a polite formality. Jesus was saying I am not angry with you for how you have behaved. I forgive you and I want you to serve Me. And to do so I am giving you the power of the Holy Spirit to do this for Me. And, even more importantly, I am giving you My authority (The Keys to Heaven) to forgive sins in My Name just as I have forgiven you here.

Now, there is no explanation for why Thomas, of all the disciples, was not with the others on Jesus’ first appearance that Easter Sunday evening. I want to give him the benefit of the doubt (catch the irony here?) and say he was out looking for Jesus. He had heard, like all the others, that Jesus was no longer dead. Maybe, he believed their reports and wanted to see Jesus for himself. When the disciples told him that in his absence Jesus appeared to them, maybe he was simply making a statement about his fellow disciples. Maybe his skepticism was in light of all that they had all missed in Jesus’ announcement about His suffering, death, and resurrection. Maybe he was thinking none of us got it right when Jesus told us what was about to happen, and then it did. Why do you think that I should trust you now? I need my own personal truth. I need to see Jesus. In that case, Thomas has been misnamed as ***“Doubting Thomas.”*** We should say he was trying to base reality on sound evidence and valid observation. He was like a detective or a scientist. His reality was

not whimsical, but practical. He was just saying, “*Where is the beef?*” He was just saying, “*Where is the evidence?*” He was simply using the rationalism of the Enlightenment to determine the truth. People today do that all the time. I am sure you do too. And, Jesus, in His mercy and love, came and gave Thomas the evidence he needed. He provided His own body as that proof. And as a result, Thomas confessed that Jesus was alive BUT more importantly that Jesus was God, when he said, “***My Lord, and my God!***”

The emotions prevalent in that upper room of fear, doubt, disbelief, disillusionment, loss, and loneliness all were replaced by reconciliation, forgiveness, happiness, commitment, confidence, and courage. These same men who were cowering in fear and shame and despondency were changed suddenly. Jesus had come to them and made a miraculous difference in their lives. Everything that they had seen and experienced with Jesus to this time had been training for what was to come. We heard in the reading from Acts that later, instead of hiding from the religious leaders, as they were in this reading, they were emboldened to talk about Jesus. And, even when they were thrown in prison – locked behind closed doors, and then miraculously freed, they courageously went out and continued to spread the Gospel for which they had been imprisoned. The story in Acts is like a mirror of the Gospel of John. Jesus freed them in both cases. They were no longer imprisoned in fear and despair and shame and guilt, they were free and alive with joy

and hope and the power of the Holy Spirit which Jesus had given them.

When we lock ourselves up in self-pity and remorse because of what we have said or done, when we are immobilized, traumatized, and fearful because of what has happened and how shamefully we acted, when we are stuck in the past and unable to move forward into the future, Jesus is there for us. He is there to give us His ***“Shalom alekem.”***

When we are in the throes of doubt and ask where is God, and where is Jesus, how could all of this have happened? Jesus comes to us in His Word and His sacraments and says, *“I am here.”* ***“I am the truth. I am the way. I am the life. I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life.”***

Jesus comes and forgives. Jesus comes and brings us joy with His presence. When we allow Jesus to break through the barriers of our locked doors and bring us His forgiving ***“Shalom alekem;”*** when we accept the power of the Holy Spirit, which He places upon us; when we open our closed hearts to the forgiveness He offers us so that we are enabled to offer forgiveness to others, then, we have joy. Then, we have peace. Then, we are equipped to share the Good News of who He is and what He did for us. Then, we are free to proclaim His great works to others just as those eleven disciples did. They never lived in fear again. They proclaimed their Lord and their God to the world in which they lived and beyond the world where they lived. They truly, truly, heard what Jesus said to them, maybe for

the first time. Their hearts and eyes were open to the truth. Stirred by the Holy Spirit and committed to their Savior, all of them, except one, died as martyrs proclaiming the Good News just as Jesus directed them to do. According to tradition, the one who we call the “Doubter” went to India and began to preach the Gospel in 52 A.D. in Kerala, on the southern coast of India, and 20 years later in 72 A.D. was martyred by being pierced with spears. His tomb is found in Mylapore.

St. John wrote in the last words of our Gospel reading today that the story of the disciples after the Resurrection is for us. (We sing his words as a preface to the reading of the Gospel, ***“These words are written that you may believe.”***) It is a witness for us that Jesus rose from death and that we can believe in His resurrection. In fact, our belief is even more blessed because, unlike Thomas and all the disciples and those who saw the risen Jesus, we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit without physical evidence. Or is that true? Each time when we gather here in the name of Jesus, He is here. He is present. Each time when we receive the Holy Sacrament, we receive the very body and blood of our living Savior. He is present in, with, and under the bread and wine which are physical, tangible elements. Jesus is here today. He is here in this room. He is here on this altar. He is here to show us He is alive and has conquered death.

Even more important, He is here to commission each of us as His servants to tell the Good News of His

presence in our lives, of His forgiveness and salvation for our sins, of our hope for the life of the world to come with Him, as portrayed to St. John and the sure truth at certain truth that just as He arose from the dead, we too shall arise from death by our faith and trust in Jesus. These great truths should not be lost on us as just another story or just another set of words in a sermon. Not as words heard but not heeded, as were Jesus' words telling His disciples of His death and resurrection. Those truths were proven by the witness of His dubious and skeptical disciples themselves. Those words and these words are as sure as Thomas was that Jesus was alive and was His Lord and His God. With these words in our hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have joy and happiness. For we know, we believe, and we confess that: *"Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!"* And now, Shalom alekem. Go in the greatest peace that can be given you, as the commissioned servants of Jesus, as the blessed believing witnesses to this Gospel, and share it in joy and happiness as He has commanded you to do as His present-day disciples. Amen.