

APRIL 19, 2020 – SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER 2020

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PRELIMINARY NOTE OF THANKS TO PASTOR SMITH AND THE ELDERS FOR THEIR STANCE OF HOPE AND ASSURANCE AMID THIS TIME OF UNCERTAINTY. THE SURE MERCIES OF GOD HAVE YOU, BELOVED OF CHRIST, WHO IS YOUR KING, YOUR KING OF FORGIVENESS, YOUR KING OF LIFE.

IN NOMINE IESU

Beloved of Christ the King,

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN, INDEED! ALLELUIA! Don't you just love how death dies in Christ... How the gift of Life springs forth from that borrowed tomb... How the women's spices lie unused, yes, forgotten! I love how the fragrance of life is so much sweeter than the fragrance which covers the stench of death! Jesus is alive... and... in your Baptismal gift, your dying with Christ and being raised with Him, so are you! That is a FACT!

Yes, facts are stubborn things. In my freshman year of college I took a speech class. The old guy who taught us believed in memorization... oh, not even so much of our speeches, but of his wisdom, of the book he wrote. One item he told us on day one that would surely be on the final was for us to define what is a FACT!

Just as with our Confirmands, this professor didn't want our opinion, our own reason or strength. He wanted his words echoed back to him. Well, after more than 44 years I can still recite Fred Bowman's definition:

A FACT IS A PHENOMENON, THE OBSERVATION OF WHICH WE OURSELVES, OR THOSE UPON WHOM WE MAY RELY HAVE WITNESSED. THIS OBSERVATION GOES BEYOND WHAT IS JUST ONLY PROBABLE.

Now at that time I didn't realize how important that definition would be. Facts matter. They matter for us on this glorious day of resurrection. Remember:

- * Christ on the Cross, nearing 3 pm that Friday declared "It is finished!" and then breathed His last and died – FACT!
- * The spear pierced His side and from that awful gash flowed water and blood - yes, a reminder to us of both Baptism and the Supper, but it is also clinical proof of death – FACT!
- * The women, the Marys, were eyewitnesses to this – FACT!

These women grieved dearly, and upon the Sabbath rest gathered the burial spices. They arrive at the Tomb and find the large rock that had hermetically sealed the tomb up and out of its notch. The Body of Jesus is gone. An angel speaks: *HE IS NOT HERE! HE IS RISEN AS HE SAID...*

We know that His visage changed because not only did Mary not recognize Jesus, neither did the two Emmaus Disciples were kept from recognizing Him, and at the shore of Galilee, with the miraculous catch of fish, He was not at first recognized by the disciples.

Mary supposes Him to be the gardener, and then His one word sermon of comfort comes as He says, "Mary!" She sees that He is alive and bears witness to it – FACT!

Yes! The FACTS are in. The women should be believed. Yet on the night of the Resurrection we peer into the Room where they gathered, the 10 Apostles and those with them were behind locked doors. Their grief was real because of the FACTS they witnessed. Starting on Thursday night in Gethsemane they witnessed these FACTS, the same facts that caused the grief of the Marys, and more:

- * The harsh arrest
- * The mock trials
- * The spitting and mocking
- * The horrid scouring
- * The cruel walk up Golgotha's hill
- * The death upon that Terrible Tree of the Cross
- * The final words and giving up of His Spirit
- * The Spear Piercing His heart.

These facts do not square with the words of life reported by the women. Oh, and according to Mark's Gospel, the women's initial response was not to go and tell the disciples.

So, the doors were locked where they were. But here are some other facts: Jesus is Risen! In His resurrection body He needs no key to unlock the door, no latch or handle to turn, no door to open. He literally stands in their midst. Death could not hold Him. The stone could not block His exodus unto life. No door nor lock would keep Him out. He is Risen, as He said! Hallelujah!

Beloved, He stands in your house now and in this beautiful House atop the hill on Ford Street. He was there in person with the 10, and He is here with you in His Gifts, the precious Word and blessed Sacraments.

These gifts that soon you shall once again receive, receive as one family around one sure promise, one Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

He stands in their midst and declares "Peace be with you!" It is recorded in the Greek, for that is the language of the New Testament, but I suspect that His word was "Shalom" is with you. Now that word, "Shalom" is peace where chaos is put right... if you will, where the Fall and its Curse is Answered and Reversed.

"Peace be with you" I believe is this and even more, for Jesus is our Peace as Paul said in Ephesians 2:14. He is the very Prince of Shalom, the Prince of Peace, as Isaiah prophesied of Him (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus is with them... and with you, beloved! This is a FACT! And, recall this is how Matthew ends His Gospel: "Lo! I am with you always, to the end of the age."

And so, the facts of death are met... AND CONQUERED... by the FACTS of Life! And here are the FACTS:

- * Here are my hands and side!
- * The Office of the Keys is Given
 - The sins they forgive are forgiven by God in heaven, never to attach to the one confessing them.
 - The sins they retain, the sins not owned by the one who commits them - they are indeed retained, by the unrepentant sinner!

Why is this matter of the Church being the repository of the Heart of God, the heart of restoration in repentance and forgiveness so important? He came to indeed bring Peace! Peace with God for those who ate the forbidden fruit, and Peace between fellow fallen humans! The Psalmist writes (68:6) that the Lord settles the Solitary in the Family. These lonely, hurting men who were in utter shock now were to see themselves in the community of the Church, that they are indeed the body of Christ.

The forgiveness of sins is everything. Behold how Luke records Resurrection night in the formerly locked room:

^{ESV} **Luke 24:46** and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ AND THAT REPENTANCE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS SHOULD BE PROCLAIMED IN HIS NAME TO ALL NATIONS, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ **You are witnesses of these things.**

It is all about His Peace, His Shalom restoring us to the relationship we had in Eden, both with the Triune God... and with one another. Yes, Easter, the Resurrection of our Lord is all about this Peace. This is the very breath of the Holy Spirit... it is the breath of life for the fallen world... yes, for you! Peace be with you!

So, now the FACTS of His Resurrection are before the 10, and us. And... and this is vital... Thomas was not with them! They tell Thomas: "we have seen the Lord!" But Thomas knew the same facts that the 10 knew before they "saw the Lord!" So, Thomas' rebuff, that unless... unless he puts his finger into the holes and his hand into the spear-pierced side, Thomas would not believe!

Fast forward to this day, after 8 days, the next Sunday, this day we celebrate today, the 11 are behind closed doors in the same room and once again the Lord is in their midst. His words to them are the same as they were on the night of the Resurrection: SHALOM BE WITH YOU! PEACE BE WITH YOU! Here, Thomas are the holes in My hands, and here... thrust your hand into My side! Cease with the unbelief and be believing!

Now Thomas was indeed, "One of the Twelve!" He was an eyewitness to all that He had said and done from the beginning... and now... here... He is an eyewitness to the Resurrection. You will remember that Speech Prof's definition of a FACT: "It is something that we ourselves, **or those in whom we may rely** have witnessed! This observation goes beyond what is just only probable!"

Thomas, like his brothers, the other 10, and Matthias, they had to actually witness, to actually see the wounds. Their witness is that observation, that witness that we can rely upon. Your faith and mine is in the IRREFUTABLE FACTS that not only is death dead, but that Eden is Restored, that sinners have a place in the Family, the Family of God!

And, here is one more irrefutable fact: Thomas' Confession: **My Lord and My God!** Yes, Jesus is the Son of God. But that does not make Him to be **God, Jr.!** Jesus is not the first created being of the One God! No! He is as we confess in the Creed, "very God of very God, begotten, not made, **being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things are made!**"

This statement in our Nicene Creed is grounded in this confession of Thomas, for Thomas calls Jesus God! Even as the Father is God, so also is Jesus! Jesus being God, Jesus being alive after being dead means that those who believe in Him - and yes, through the observation of those upon whom we may rely is important.

That means that the final words to Thomas by our Savior, the Beatitude that Jesus speaks: "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." The "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" is the gift given to you and me and all the church as we are met by the witness of Thomas and the rest of the 12.

As we, the Newborn Babes, those born from above, desire the pure milk of the word, so we have it... pure, true, yes, factual and faithful! God truly died... and yes... God made death to die! The last enemy to be destroyed is death... and we believe this because of the eyewitness of Thomas and the rest of the 12.

And yes, Jesus did many other things not written in the Gospel and the Gospels, but what we have is Christ and in Him we have life in His name! These are the Facts!

At this time when there are so many questions and question marks about Corona, about when we will gather again in this House and receive the Gifts as one, when will loved ones be back at work, at school, will sick loved ones find health, will the grieving find peace at the death of loved ones, will our 401-k's and the overall economy recover we have the full assurance that Christ is Risen! Or, to borrow a thought from St. Paul, "³⁸ For I am persuaded that neither, death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor Corona Virus nor worry about any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38-39 NKJ) He is Risen, indeed. Alleluia! Amen and SOLI DEO GLORIA