

The Second Sunday of Easter – 2021

Acts 4:32-35

1 John 1:1—2:2

John 20:19-31

Blessed are you. Jesus says as much. Blessed are you, the saints of Christ the King. No beatitude is quite like this one; no contemporary word competes with this divine statement that sweeps into our courtyard. Blessed are you; and it is so. “Though you have not seen him, you love him” (1 Peter 1:8a). Blessed are you. “Though you do not now see him, you believe in him” (1 Peter 1:8b). Blessed are you. By the Spirit of God, by that which has been breathed into you, you “rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8c-9). Blessed are you.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). *That* is Christ’s reference to you. When our crucified and risen Lord said those words to Thomas, He had this Divine Service in view. The Lord Christ, who is present here with His Words and His Wounds, He pronounces you blessed. You, who were dead in trespasses and sins, God has made you alive in Christ, it is by grace you have been saved. Blessed are you. As the world careens out of control, turned upside down by death and fear and unfaith, you are the blessed, those who have the peace which surpasses all understanding. Last Sunday we celebrated the event of events, the resurrection of the Son of God. Light and life and song and hope filled this divine assembly and the hearts of those gathered here in His name. Today, the beauty of that event is reprised. Like every Sunday, we gather to rejoice in His resurrection and we are called blessed.

Has your heart ever been blistered? So many, in this last year, have faced uncertainty, financial loss, forced separation from sick or aged loved ones, or actually having death visit their home, their families. Thomas’ heart had been blistered. Like being in a viscous car-wreck, the airbag deploying like a gun shot, hitting you in the face, leaving your ears ringing and your head spinning, Thomas’ heart was concussed. He saw the violence, the hatred, the cruelty spent on the Lord of glory. Hope had been dismantled in Thomas’ heart. Love made him vulnerable to this great pain; love for His Teacher, His Master. His answer might well have been to protect himself, protect his blistered heart. Can you relate? Have you ever been gravely disappointed and told yourself, “never again”? Up goes your guard. Up go your defenses. Thomas saw the nails, the blood, the shame – love had been blistered, torn and mocked and killed.

Thomas was absent. That absence was divinely orchestrated. God works all things together for good and Thomas’ absence was for his good and for yours, for the Christian church the world over. Thomas was absent from the others. And if ever there was an assembly that was the antithesis of peace, then it was the disciples who were huddled in fear in a locked room. An unholy synergy was taking place between the Jewish religious rulers in Jerusalem and the local authorities of Rome. Under false pretenses, by virtue of trumped-up charges heavy laden with false testimony they deliberately crucified a profoundly innocent Man. Jesus the good, Jesus the honorable, Jesus the just – they tortuously put Him to death. If any act was designed to put the followers of Christ on notice it was to crucify their Leader. Galileans were known by their accent. They were exposed. The threat against them was real. And into this room rife with fear comes the Risen King.

The same Lord who is present in this place strode into that locked room to breathe out the breath of His Spirit on His apostles. Impervious to assault; triumphant over death; shattering the tomb on a glorious Sunday – the Lord had the message of messages to deliver to His beloved: “Peace be with you.” The evidence of His mighty work was in His flesh. The towering evidence of peace between God and man was in His flesh. Wounds – hands and feet; hands and feet and side; He showed them His wounds and said it again: “Peace be with you” (John 20:21). The wounds which you see as the evidence of My love – these wounds are for you. The peace which I have to give is for you. The forgiveness which flows from My wounds and brings you My towering peace – that forgiveness is for you. St. John gives us the greatest understatement ever written: “Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20). Their hearts nearly came out of their chests for the joy they had; the Lord lives!

One moment they were one thing, and in a flash, in a twinkling of an eye, they were something else. Fear, dread, and the menace of death ruled the room and then the Risen Christ comes in and all is changed. What did they become, those men? What was their newfound outlook, their disposition, their approach to difficulty? Did life all of a sudden become a chair of bowlies, a never-ending primrose path of yellow bricks and daily stimulus checks? You know what those men became. You know how many of them were martyred. You know all about their adversity. And you also know the courage, the fortitude, the hope that stirred them, that has stirred the church in every age. What, in your mind’s eye, is the church to be in our era? What, in your mind’s ear, can you hear our Lord saying to us? What are we to be?

Thomas wasn’t there. Oh, he was told. “We have seen the Lord.” Was there anything missing from that message? Was the Holy Spirit intentionally absent from that blessed Word to that blessed disciple? Oh, no. Stubborn; willfully defiant; guard up, defenses up – vulnerable no more, Thomas is adamant in his approach to Christianity. “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25). It’s almost a dare. Good news falling on deaf ears. I’m sure that you’ve never met anyone like that. A week later (eight days), Jesus comes to them again, same room, same crew – now Thomas is present – and the Lord once again unleashes a solid declaration: Peace be with you.

And then He turns all of His attention to Thomas. All the things that Thomas said that he must do in order to believe, Jesus beckons him to do. Put your finger here, reach out your hand and put it in my side; stop doubting and believe. Of all the magnificent statements of faith in Holy Scripture, of all the beautiful words that come from the mouths of believers – are there any more magnificent than these: “My Lord and my God!”

Like Thomas, I have doubted and been a pitiful figure of selfishness, a fellow who at times refuses to see beyond his own pain, and Jesus calls to me... through His Word, His promises: put your finger in the mark in my hand, stop disbelieving and nurturing your own self-regard. You are like me, like Thomas. You have nurtured unbelief by self-pity or excessive worry or by rehearsing your problems as though they are bigger than Christ and His holy cross. The Lord is loving toward you; so too is He emphatic and uncompromising: “Stop doubting and believe.” Is it not our joy to say: “My Lord and my God?” Our lives are in His mighty hands. He was

crucified to give you a life that is not subject to death. My Lord and my God. He took your sin and atoned for it with His holy blood. My Lord and my God. His empty tomb resolves every issue that barks at us with teeth and claws. If Jesus is risen from the dead, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, will He not, along with Him, raise our bodies to be like His glorious body?

That is what you believe; that is the faith which has been breathed into you. You have not seen and yet you believe. The Lord declares you blessed. As the pastor, in the communion liturgy, elevates the host, Christ's body, and the chalice, Christ's blood, it is as though the risen King announces His present peace anew, just as He did in that locked room: "The peace of the Lord be with you always." I'm not a liturgical innovator, but y'all could well respond: My Lord and my God. After we eat His body, after we drink His blood, after we leave here and go to our station in life, what are we to be? We are to be what Christ calls us to be. Faithful, humble, strong, courageous, forgiven and free. That is what the blessed are for that is what Christ makes us to be.