

Our Blessing

Second Sunday of Easter
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Saturday, April 18, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 John 1:1–2:2; John 20:19–31

In the gospel this evening we read of the disciples hiding out in a house with the doors secured; painfully, fearfully, slowly trying to make sense of things. There is no question about the disciples' loyalty to Jesus but they didn't always understand Him. He had told the disciples about His arrest, His trial and His death all of which they now understood. But either they had forgotten, or they had misunderstood. His telling them that in three days He would rise again. Besides, that notion was a preposterous to them as it is to some people even today.

What they did understand was the harshness and determination of the Romans. So after the crucifixion they secured themselves in a house in Jerusalem with the windows shuttered and the doors closed for fear that the Romans would come looking for them. They had no doubt that if the Romans were looking for them and found them, they, too, would be crucified.

Now if that wasn't enough, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst, just like that, and what does He say? "Peace be with you." Then, while they stood with their mouths hanging open, He showed them His hands and His side. There was absolutely no doubt who He was.

Yet sometimes I wonder at the gospel writers. The gospel said when they recognized Jesus they rejoiced.

When I was a kid I remember discovering what I thought was a wonderful trick toy. It was 4 inch nail separated to allow it to fit over a finger so it appeared to have been driven through the finger on which it was worn. It was suitably coated with what looked like blood. Slipping it on, crying loudly, I ran into our kitchen and sent my family into shock. I had acted out the trick and it worked just the way I hoped it would. Except that when I finally took the nail off my finger, my parents were in no mood to join in the fun and soon they saw to it that my hilarity was markedly reduced.

I can't help but think Jesus sudden appearance among the disciples in a secured room produced much more of a reaction than the gospel writer dares to describe! As Jesus appeared He announced, "Peace be with you." Their response was probably not peaceful at all. No one was supposed to know where they were hiding. How did Jesus find them? How did he enter without using the door? The disciples were anxious, afraid, and uncertain of what would happen next. Yet here was the Master right in their midst. And alive! Slowly they began to calm down, and then to rejoice. Jesus' presence unlocked the doors of fear that held the disciples captive.

There is good news there for us. Jesus' presence in our lives unlocks the doors of the fears that hold us captive. There is also a gift that is given to the disciples in the room at this time and to us in our baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit. The real indwelling presence of God which is the divine empowerment we receive to live as God's people in the world. The disciples would now

be putting their lives on the line as His representatives, which is exactly the commission we received in our baptism.

Do you see how it goes, the disciples had the doors of fear unlocked in their lives so that they might unlock the doors of fear in other people's lives and so it has gone down through the ages. And with that gift came a remarkable commission, to be the agents of forgiveness in a dark, troubled, guilt ridden world. In fact, we are transformed from being just ordinary people to become instruments of God's love and channels of His grace.

In a few minutes we will gather around this table to receive a morsel of bread and a taste of wine, the body and blood of Christ, the assurance of our forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. But it is still a daunting business to actually live out the discipleship to which Christ calls us, unless.....unless we realize that we are really in His living, empowering, enabling presence.

Vernon Armitage, in his book *Living Life to the Max*, tells about his first speedboat ride. He was a kid hanging around a dock when a family friend, Charlie, a speedboat driver, told him to jump in. Vernon was excited until the boat actually took off. The boat went every way but the way he thought it should, and he thought his life was over. He found himself sitting in the bottom of the boat, frightened.

Scrunched up on that floor, Vernon soon began to think. Charlie, he decided, was a good family friend. He'd known Charlie all his life. Therefore, he began to feel he could trust Charlie. Before the boat ride ended, Vernon was up in his seat yelling and having fun with everyone else. It wasn't because he had so much courage, but because he knew and trusted Charlie.

So it is with Christ. He is the one sent from God to transform our world and to transform our lives. And so we are empowered and enabled to do what He asks of us. He does not want his followers out in the world witnessing to something that they have not really experienced for themselves, so He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit as an internal witness. We do not have to simply depend on a story that we heard long ago. God is forever fresh in our hearts. Christ takes away our fears.

As the disciples were having this extraordinary experience with the risen Christ. One of them, Thomas, was off by himself. For whatever reason Thomas wasn't with the rest of the group when Jesus appeared that first Easter evening. And when the other disciples caught up with Thomas, they told him that they had seen the risen Jesus. They were filled with excitement and hope. Thomas wasn't quite sure he understood. He was trying hard to make sense out of their story, but what they told him was just too good to be true. It wasn't that Thomas didn't believe his friends, but he was a realist. He wasn't someone who believed in fairy tales. Thomas shook his head and said, "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."

A whole week went by with Thomas struggling; doubting if what his friends told him was actually true. But he continued to meet with the other disciples. Just because he didn't believe exactly as they did, didn't exclude him from their fellowship. Rather, he was allowed to voice his

doubts within the faith community. It's all right to have doubts and questions. Christ accepts us just as we are, doubts, questions, and all. Thomas was not excluded because of his unbelief.

A week later, though, while the disciples were meeting, the risen Lord Jesus once again appeared in their midst. This time Thomas was with the others, and he saw with his own eyes the Lord standing in front of him. And Jesus said to him, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe." That was all it took. The sight of Christ's wounds was enough and Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!"

And Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

And here we are, and that is our blessing, thanks be to God.

Amen.