

A Sermon for the First Sunday after Easter,
commonly called Low Sunday, 19th April 2020 at Saint John's Church in Savannah

from the GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT JOHN Peace be unto you.

The Easter gospels begin with Christ already risen from the dead. On this feast of Passover, he has passed over entirely from death to life; and with the stone rolled away, the door is open for his disciples to follow him in his Passover. Yet the empty tomb, the message of angels, is not enough for them to follow him. They are in their own tomb, their own lockdown, of grief, guilt, despair, and doubt— and Jesus must come to them, and by his word of peace, fulfill his Passover *in* them, make them partakers of his resurrection, by delivering them from doubt to faith, from grief to joy, from despair to hope. And just as Jesus came to them with the word of peace, so they must now go with the same word of peace to others. If the day began with the apostles in spiritual and physical lockdown – it ends with Christ's commissioning them and empowering them by his Spirit to proclaim the gospel in all the world: *As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.*

In today's collect is a quotation of Romans 4:25 *Christ died for our sins, and rose again for our justification. Christ died for our sins* - that is, in our place, on our behalf, and for our benefit, he took upon himself the judgment and condemnation which he did not deserve but which we did. And since his rising from the tomb is also “for us” – in our place, on our behalf, and for our benefit - so also is his deliverance from that judgment, his vindication as righteous, which God declared by raising him from the dead. As Paul says, *he rose again for our justification.* For the sake of his Son, God extends the same declaration he made for his Son – a declaration of righteous standing or justification – to sinners who have put their faith in Christ, and remits the debt of punishment their sins deserve. This is the peace – peace with God, the peace of sins forgiven, of sinners justified - that Jesus announces to his disciples. If by faith we receive his peace, then we are reconciled with the Father, and our sins are remitted, our debts are cancelled, save for the debts of gratitude and love; if we refuse his peace, then we remain estranged from God, and our sins are retained, we are liable for them still.

So the response of faith to the proclamation of peace in the risen Lord is critical – and it’s a response in question, in the one apostle who was not present with the others on Easter evening, when Christ appeared to them. Because Thomas will not believe what they tell him of Christ’s rising from death, and expresses his doubt with a certain hyperbole: *Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.* From what we know of Thomas, he was not a kind of hyper-critical skeptic but a loyal disciple, with a pessimistic outlook. Yet his unbelief is a problem – since he is one of the twelve, one who will share in the apostolic mission – and he can’t possibly proclaim good news that he himself does not believe.

So the Sunday after Easter when Thomas is this time gathered with the disciples, Jesus comes to them again in peace – and gently deals with Thomas according to his weakness and need. *Thomas, he says, reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.* For the Son of God to come into the world, and take a body to him – to allow that body to be scourged, crowned with thorns, nailed to the cross, and laid in the grave – that’s an astonishing humility – a gracious condescension. But when the victory over sin and death was won, to come to a doubting skeptical disciple in the same body now risen from death, and bid him touch, handle, and probe this body’s wounds with his finger – here is a self-humbling servant love that can only move us to wonder and praise. And it is very effective: for if Thomas was reprehensibly slow to believe in Christ’s resurrection – he is very quick to grasp the implications. With his eyes he sees the risen body of Christ’s human nature, and with his heart and mind he leaps from doubt to faith to grasp the unseen divine nature, by whose power alone Christ could have risen. He confesses that the man Jesus is Lord and God – and not only that, but specifically that is he my *Lord and my God* – the incarnate God who died, and rose again, not only for all men, but him personally. The faith he confesses – is the fundamental core truth of the Church’s teaching, the Catholic Faith. It is also the personal faith through which we are each of us justified for Christ’s sake. Thomas, Jesus says, is *blessed to have seen and believed* – but *blessed* also, he says, *are those who believe and have not seen*, who believe simply on the word of eyewitness testimony of the Apostles, including Thomas, in the Church’s witness to Christ - testimony such as that written, as St. John says, *in this book, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that*

believing ye might have life through his name. That my Lord and my God died for all men, and that he died *for me* – apart from this faith, we cannot be justified, our sins are not remitted, and there is no peace with God. By this faith alone, do we *have life through his name.* As that is the purpose of St. John in writing the gospel, so should it be our purpose in reading it, and in applying its teaching to our selves, with earnest prayer.

We live in a hyper-skeptical age, which is paradoxically credulous and uncritical about its own skepticism. Conventional wisdom says that the resurrection could never happen, and as in every age, compliant conformists fall in with the conventional wisdom. Though they claim the authority of reason for their skepticism, few bother to examine rationally the historical evidence for the resurrection. It takes an unconventional mind to realize that the objections to faith in the resurrection are far from irrefutable – and that the evidence for it is very hard to explain away. Others demand a kind of mathematical level of certainty – which in fact we do not expect of any truth outside of mathematics. For it is simply the case, that we believe all kinds of things, as probable rather than proven beyond any doubt, simply on the word of people who know about them – on the word of witnesses. Even in matters of science and technology, we begin to learn them by believing much that we do not understand, taking many positions on trust, and accepting many things on the testimony of experts. And in the most exact science, even the most advanced scientist begins with axioms and postulates he cannot possibly prove – and without which he can discover nothing. Like Thomas, in our skepticism and doubt we are demanding to see before we will believe. But perhaps in truth it's the other way around – that only by believing, will we be able to see.

Today perhaps we are chafing at the restrictions of physical lockdown, but perhaps we should be considering the possibility of our own spiritual lockdown, a self-imposed prison of guilt, grief, pessimism, skepticism, and doubt. Let us pray, that by the Spirit of the Lord at work in the witness of the apostles, the risen Lord may come to us in peace, to deliver us from doubt to faith, that being justified and accepted as righteous for his sake, we may have remission of sins and eternal life in his name. Amen.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Rev 5:12

The Holy Eucharist ... crucified and risen Lord;
for the threefold peace he gives to those who believe in him,
the peace of our reconciliation with God, which he accomplished for us on the cross and shows forth in his resurrection
the peace which he sends us to proclaim in all the world, for the remission of sins
the peace which we receive from him, by means of faith
... those who have fallen asleep in the faith of Christ, and in the hope of the resurrection – Elizabeth Morgan Derst of this parish

Introit: As new-born babes, alleluia, as reasonable beings desire the sincere milk of the word; alleluia, alleluia (1 Peter 2:1). Sing we merrily unto God our strength: make a cheerful noise unto the God of Jacob (ps. 81:1)

Communion: Reach hither thy hand, and behold the place of the nails, alleluia; and be not faithless, but believing, alleluia, alleluia.

Epistle 1 John 5:4-10a (10b-12).

For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. ⁵ Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? ⁶ This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. ⁷ For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. ⁸ And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. ⁹ If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. ¹⁰ He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself *: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. ¹¹ And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

John 20:19-31

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. ²⁰ And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the LORD. ²¹ Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: ²³ Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

²⁴ But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the LORD. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. ²⁶ And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. ²⁷ Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. ²⁸ And Thomas answered and said unto him, My LORD and my God. ²⁹ Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. ³⁰ And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: ³¹ But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.