

“Blessed Are Those”

John 20:19-31

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¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you.”** ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”** ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, **“Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”**

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you.”** ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, **“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”** ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”**

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Prayer.

A number of items in the news recently have caused us to reflect upon death and end of life issues. The terrible tragedy of Terri Schiavo, the circumstances of her persistent vegetative state, her loss of privacy, the fracturing of her family, and the politicizing of this unfortunate woman have given us all cause to reflect upon advanced directives – living wills, health care proxies, and durable power of attorney.

We are forced to rethink our approach to death. Western, high tech and highly educated Americans have come to consider death as the enemy to be avoided at all costs. We have substituted a natural, God given process of death with a clinical, medical model of prevent, delay, avoid, protect life at all costs. We have also seen all the political and religious extremist come out of the woodwork, and it causes us to proceed with suspicion and caution.

The slow death vigil for Pope John Paul II causes us to reflect upon his chosen method of dying. He has made sure that the message of the church is proclaimed to one and all- that he likens his suffering with the suffering of Christ in his passion and death. He dedicated his

life to point to Christ. And in his death, he asks us to continue looking to Christ, for in Christ we also share in His resurrection.

Last Sunday was the first Sunday of Easter; and today is the second. The Good News of the Gospel is this: though Jesus suffered and died upon a cross, had His body broken, hands and feet nailed to the vertical and horizontal crossbars, had His side pierced with a spear after He breathed his last, was removed from the cross, laid in a tomb and sealed shut for three days, Jesus rose from the dead and returned to the women who supported Him and to His disciples. Jesus was dead, and now He is alive, risen from the dead.

This is the most essential truth of Christianity. It is the core of our belief and faith. It is reported in all four Gospels, proclaimed in the Acts of the Apostles, and reported throughout the New Testament Epistles. The eye witness accounts of Christ's resurrection is what set fire to the early Church, causing it to spread quickly throughout the known world, even in the face of incredible persecution and opposition.

For two thousand years the Church has been living off this essential witness: Jesus was dead, and now He is alive, risen from the dead. It is the essential truth of the scriptures, the focus of our worship, and it comes to us today.

But it hasn't always been easy. Doubt has been around a long time. If you have given it serious thought, if you are normal, you have to think to yourself, resurrection from the dead is pretty high on the weird scale! Dead is dead. I've seen the dead before, and there just isn't any coming back to life. We bury the deceased. We cremate their remains. Autopsy and embalming pretty much assure us that any life that was in the body is now gone. From a scientific, logical, or intellectual perspective, resurrection just can't be done.

We are not alone in our doubt. There was doubt among those Upper Room disciples, hiding and quivering, frightened for their life behind locked doors, for fear of the Jews. He comes and stands among them. He had to materialize right in front of them. They see with their own eyes. That's what it takes to make them believe.

Thomas, who was absent the first time Christ came and stood among them couldn't believe until Jesus could pass his litmus test, "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." (John 20:25b). Ever since then, Thomas has had a bad rap. Even though he did see and touch the risen Lord, even though he believed in the final analysis, he's been called "Doubting Thomas."

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus replies (John 20:29).

Down through the ages there have been schools of scholars and theologians who have disputed the physical resurrection of Jesus. They have allowed a drive for historical truth cloud their faith and judgment about the essential truth that is God's to reveal in the Holy Scriptures: Jesus was dead, and now He is alive, risen from the dead.

In my own life and experience, I know that there is no argument that I can make to convince anyone. There is no rational or logical means of convincing a reluctant skeptic. When I proclaim that Jesus was dead, and now He is alive, risen from the dead, I simply know it to be true in the depths of my heart.

I know it to be true because the stewardship of the witness has been passed to me, handed down to me by a whole legion of saints, 50 generations of Christians who have upheld this essential truth. I know it to be true because I am surrounded by new life and resurrection every day of my life.

A young man is assisted into church by his mother. He is making every step with the assistance of a walker. His body thin and gaunt. This was the man I had tended to at the scene of a motor vehicle accident just a year earlier. His feet had to be broken to extract him from the twisted pedals. He convulsed in his unconsciousness and his head injury was severe. I was his medic on the ambulance that had delivered him to Strong Memorial. And now, I was the preacher, the leader of worship, a pastor, who welcomed him into the sanctuary of the Palmyra church for worship. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because I witness resurrection every day.

Standing at the bedside of what had been a strong, vital man, ravaged by the stroke that left him unconscious and in hospice care during his final days, he had stopped breathing hours earlier. His old body was done for; it had served its purpose. Now it had liberated him, freed him into God's kingdom, into eternal life, where disease and death now being passed, there is no more crying or pain or suffering any more. (Revelations 21). No more arthritis. No more shortness of breath or chest pains to limit him. No more suffering. Only resurrection and eternal life. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because I witness resurrection every day.

Each day I open the door of my car, I know that driving is the most dangerous form of transportation. I know that accidents and collisions are ready to happen at any moment. We say it is only by the grace of God. We ask God for traveling protection. We know what we don't know- the accident that God prevented, the lapse of judgment that required the intercession of our Lord, the incident that those of less faith refer to as a "coincident." God incidents happen every day for those who are faithful, to those who live according to His Word. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because I witness resurrection every day.

Each day I hear life stories of those who have walked away from a life of addiction, who have left the bottle, who have lived lives of one year, 25, even 50 years of sobriety on the wagon. Each day I learn of people who walk away from street gangs, who go back to school to finish their GED, who graduate from college at age 75. Every day I hear about families that take in the children of parents who both died the previous year, couples who make their home a loving foster home, of caregivers who give their life, their all to allow their aging loved one age in place. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because I witness resurrection every day.

It is quite natural to doubt, to be skeptical. Yet, we learn in our Gospel lesson for today that Jesus reassures doubt with his loving presence. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you. ... As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:19b, 21b-23)

The disciples are met by Jesus and He gives to them the gift of his Holy Spirit. He sends them to forgive, to bring peace to the world, to share their witness that Jesus, who was dead, is risen, and is now alive. His presence brings grace and reassurance to doubting, fear filled

disciples- to those disciples 2,000 years ago, and to us gathered here today.

Christ is alive! He is present right here among us. His Holy Spirit is just as alive and vital today as it has ever been. We are the symbol of His risen body. We have become the body of Christ, sent to redeem the world, that all might be saved through Him.

Bishop William Willimon correctly observes “Without the resurrection, we are without hope. With the resurrection, through all the difficulties of life, we can go on because we know the end of the story.” We know “that the end of the story is in the hands of the God who raised the crucified Jesus from the dead. Without the resurrection, we have nothing to say to a hurting, unsteady world. With the resurrection, we have the Good News,” we've been given peace, we are called to spread forgiveness, we are a people of hope, “an embodiment of the hope and new life that Easter offers.” (William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, April 3, 2005)

We know the story. Give yourself over, and take a step of faith. Christ is alive! The Lord is risen! He is risen, indeed!