

*Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, 3.iv.2005, 9:00 a.m./10:30 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint Luke/New Bridgeville, Pennsylvania
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle/Brogue, Pennsylvania
Acts 2:14a,22-32; Psalm 16; I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31
Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2*

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from God Our Father and from Our Risen
Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! ✠ Amen.

*Jesus said to [Thomas]: "Have you believed because you have
seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have
come to believe."*

-- John 20:29

Each of the Four Evangelists has a special gift to bring to the us in the portrait they paint of Jesus in the memory of the Early Church. Matthew locates Jesus squarely within Israel's historic experience of God and hope for the Messiah. Mark makes sure that we know that not even the very first followers of understood Who He was or all that He did and said until after His death and resurrection. Luke shows the power of God's Holy Spirit at work in Jesus' life, ministry and teaching at all times, a power that links Him to the Prophets, especially Isaiah. John shows us many things about the life and nature of Jesus and the life of God, but one thing in particular he stresses is the different ways in which Jesus' first

disciples experienced God, the very different ways in which the first disciples experienced and lived their faith.

Peter is utterly tenaciously loyal by nature, and he is loyal to his Lord. But Peter learns through his own failure to witness to Jesus in the time of trial that God's love and forgiveness is greater than Peter's loyalty and courage, and that it is even greater than Peter's bitter guilt over denying Jesus three times. Jesus returns to Peter in Peter's faith experience as a loving brother and friend. Judas learns, to his tragic grief, that God's purpose in Jesus is greater than his own political and religious ideals. He at first experiences Jesus as a disappointment and as an embarrassment, only to realize too late that it is he, Judas, who will go down to his own destruction and down in history as the one who not only disappointed but betrayed his Master. John and Mary Magdalene experience Jesus and relate to Him in an almost purely emotional way, expressing both their sorrow at Jesus' suffering and death and their joy at His rising with spontaneous affection.

Thomas is different, different from all the others. Perhaps he is like you, or like me, or like someone you or I know. Thomas is

fully aware of the tragedy of Jesus' death on the cross and of the danger into which Jesus' execution by the Romans has placed all the disciples, himself included. Thomas loved Jesus and Thomas grieves over Jesus, but Thomas also refuses to let himself be caught up in a fit of emotion when the others tell him about the reports of the women and Peter and about seeing the risen Christ themselves. Thomas demands proof, and Thomas gets his proof.

There were many things Our Risen Lord could have said to Thomas when He appeared to him a week later, just as the risen Jesus could have treated Peter to some choice words by the Sea of Galilee when He sat down with the Big Fisherman to breakfast not long after the first Easter. But Jesus chooses not to condemn, neither Peter nor Thomas. Just as He will affirm Peter in his fishing, as the fisherman he is, asking him, "Peter, do you love me more than these [fish]?" so the Crucified and Risen One does not condemn Thomas in his doubting. Showing Thomas the crucifixion wounds still part of His glorified Body, Jesus simply asks Thomas whether his faith is based on this hard, empirical evidence. Perhaps it is, though the way Thomas responds, almost ashamed, with the gasp, "My Lord and my

God!" would indicate another kind of faith, a faith far deeper and broader than '*Doubting Thomas*.' Thomas had almost forgotten how the promise of the Kingdom of God had burned in his heart and mind with an everlasting flame as he heard Jesus preach this message and as he saw Jesus live it by his boundless compassion toward others. Thomas had believed in Jesus' words and works even when it seemed certain that those words and works would mean death for Jesus and for all of them. It had been *Thomas* who said, as Jesus decided to go to Bethany, near Jerusalem, in order to raise His friend Lazaraus from the dead, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" (John 11:16). Thomas was ashamed now that he had forgotten his faith, a faith deeper and broader than those words spoken in the irritability of grief to his brothers and sisters. In letting Thomas have the proof he had demanded, Jesus opened Thomas' eyes to see his own faith.

And then Our Lord says something truly wonderful. He speaks a blessing to us without condemning Thomas or the Thomas inside each of us. He says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Mary Magdalene and the other women

had seen. Peter, James and John had seen. The disciples on the way to and from Emmaus had seen. They *all* had seen the risen Jesus. *We* have *not* seen, and yet Jesus calls *us* 'blessed,' in Greek *μακάριος*, happy, *really* happy. Why? Because we have nevertheless, with *no* proof except God's Word and God's love, *believed*, trusted that God really has overcome sin and death for us and in our own humanity in Jesus Christ.

The Church of Jesus Christ is rightly compared to a great ship, a ship much larger than those fishing boats Peter and the Sons of Zebedee used on the Sea of Galilee. She has sometimes been compared to the first ship mentioned in the Bible, Noah's Ark, a ship with a precious cargo—all life on earth!—which made a perilous voyage. Noah's Ark, like the Church, and any congregation of the Church, might not always be the most pleasant of places and the crew may be tempted to jump ship at the next attractive opportunity. It is sometimes said that the only thing that prevented Noah and family from jumping overboard during those forty days of the great flood was that the storm outside was worse—*much* worse!—than the stench inside. So too in the Church, at difficult times in her history,

and sometimes in our own experience at close quarters, for not only Heaven knows what stinkers we can be! The storm of hatred and hopelessness outside the community of faith is far worse than the stench within that same community of failed sinners and far from perfect saints. And so we stay on board. But the storm outside is not the only reason, and the stench inside is tolerable once we realize we are sitting in our own pew, so to speak.

It is the blessing of the risen Jesus, the invitation of Christ Himself to *you* personally and to *me* personally, to any and to all who will hear it, that makes us want to stay with this motley crew called 'Church.' The Kingdom of Heaven, and the Church, that great ocean-going vessel of salvation that has her course set for God's Kingdom, has room on board for *every* type of disciple, for the Peters and the Johns and the Marys and the Thomases, for you and for me. There is no one way to hear the voice of Jesus calling us on board, and no one way any of us is supposed to feel, all the time, throughout our whole lives, as we serve on board this beautiful and graceful Ship of Faith. It does not matter whether you were a believer two thousand years, or two hundred years ago and now serve in the Church Triumphant,

or whether your ancestors did or whether they did not. It does not matter how your faith makes you feel, as long as it guides you to find Christ in your neighbor and to love your risen Lord in that neighbor. It does not matter whether your faith now causes you to demand honest answers to hard questions or whether your faith enables you to rest from all questions and to leave the answers in God's keeping. You *belong* to Christ and to His Church because you believe in the way *you* believe, and blessed are you because God has brought you to faith, alongside Thomas and the Apostles, together with the whole people of God. ✠Amen.

Now may Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God Our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. ✠Amen.

S. D. G. !