

John 20:19-31

April 11, 2021

This Bible text is very comforting. Because the Risen Lord shows Himself to His disciples, yes. Because Thomas, who refused to believe, exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” yes. But also for this reason. This little congregation of disciples is a pathetic mess here in John 20. Yet in our Acts reading, mere months later, this same congregation is a beautiful sight to behold. The disciples who are cowering in fear, and living in unbelief, later become a congregation of “one heart and soul,” it says, “with great power the apostles giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,” with “great grace upon them all,” and with “not a needy person among them.” And if the Risen Lord Jesus can do that for them, what can He not do for us?

These past twelve painful months have caused many pastors, along with their congregational members, to tear their hair out in frustration. The fears keeping these disciples behind locked doors not even coming close to the fears facing churches today. Indeed, many churches which resembled the Christians in our Acts reading have turned into that fearful congregation in our John reading. And many voices are asking, “When, if ever, will our congregation be as it was before?”

But that is not the question to be asking. “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*” The same Jesus who came to His fearful disciples behind locked doors is here with us with whatever fears we have.

It does not matter how pathetic a congregation may appear to be. It doesn’t matter how many doubting Thomas’ are in a congregation. All that matters is that the Risen Lord Jesus cares just as much for us as He did for His disciples in John 20. His word to us is the same as it was to them, “*Peace be with you,*” And the same word of forgiveness He gave to them, “*If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven,*” is as much for us today.

Pretty much everything in life can bring Christians, can bring a congregation to a halt. Some things more than others. But nothing can prevent Jesus. Nothing can bring Him to a halt. We might be tempted to think that His disciples’ fears could have halted Him, could have given Him pause. When He came and stood among them, how easy would it have been to say, “Shame on you!” rather than “*Peace be with you.*” But that is not how Jesus treats fearful Christians. Not shame, but peace. Not guilt for their cowardice, for our cowardice, but forgiveness.

This is always how the Lord has dealt with His fearful children. Back in Eden, our first parents were deathly afraid. But God came to them with the word of forgiveness. Back in Eden, God told them the Savior would come as one who would be scarred. In John 20 that Savior shows those scars to His disciples.

Look at your hands. Do you see any nail marks? No, you do not. The marks of the nails are in the hands of your Lord. The mark of the spear is in His side, not yours. We are going to deal with fears in life. But one thing you never have to fear is facing an angry God. You never have to fear that God will judge you because you have lived badly. And the marks are in Jesus’ hands to prove it. Would Thomas have exclaimed, “*My Lord and my God!*” had those marks not been there? They are there. They were there for him, and they are there for you.

And I want you to think about this. You are baptized into Christ Jesus. You are His beloved child. You are not a perfect child, nor am I. We sin. We do not want to, but we do because we are weak. Every day your Risen Lord Jesus shows His Father the marks of the nails in His hands and says, "I died for him, I died for her. Father, forgive this dear child of Mine." And He does. He forgives you. Every one of you.

That is why Jesus gives us the word of peace. He said, "*Peace be with you,*" to His disciples because all was well. God was not angry with them. And He is not angry with you. No matter how fearful you have been. No matter how sinful you have been. Your God is at peace with you because of Jesus.

I don't know, is our congregation a pathetic mess? Who cares? We have Jesus with us and for us. Is your life a mess? Maybe. I don't know. But really it is not, because your Lord is at peace with you. If we are a mess, it's okay. Jesus does His best work with people and churches that are a mess. If we are weak and sinful, do not fear, because He is strong and forgiving.

All of us sitting here today are like the disciples sitting behind locked doors. We are all dealing with struggles and fears as were they. We are all dealing with doubts and even unbelief as was Thomas. If we were not going through all these things, what need would we have for Jesus to come to us?

Do not think for a minute that you are a poor excuse for a Christian if you are cowering in fear for whatever reason. Do not think that you can hardly be called God's dear child because too often you act like doubting and disbelieving Thomas. And we should never think that we are a poor excuse for a Christian congregation because we resemble the disciples in John 20 behind locked doors, and not so much the disciples in our Acts reading.

It's not about us and what a mess we are. It's about Jesus and how gracious and forgiving He is. It's about the truth that you are baptized into Him always. You are God's dear child always. And you, yes you, are forgiven. Amen.