

John 20:19-31

To call Thomas, “Doubting Thomas,” is a compliment. It’s being generous. He should be called “Unbelieving Thomas.” When the other disciples told him they had seen the Lord, he did not say in response, “I doubt it.” He said “I will never believe...unless I see!” And this is the man Jesus wanted for a disciple. Even more, He makes him an apostle. This is not to suggest that the other ten disciples had it together. They were a bunch of losers...all of them. Peter, their leader, blatantly denied Jesus three times. They all forsook Him when He was arrested in the Garden. They should have been shot! These men were not soldiers of the cross; they were an army of deserters. And now, even after hearing the news that Jesus was alive, these disciples find a safe house and lock themselves in. They’re weak. They’re scared. Why does Jesus even waste His time on them?

But I’ll tell you this, I’m glad He did. I’m glad He was patient with them. I’m glad He came to them behind locked doors and said, “Peace be with you.” I’m glad He did not write Thomas off, or the others. I’m glad He forgave them. Why am I glad? Because I’m just like them. If God expects His disciples to be heroes, confident and courageous, full of faith, hope, and love--that leaves me out. I’m no hero. Just the opposite, I’m all those weak, timid, sinful disciples rolled into one.

I find it interesting that one week after Easter, when Christians are singing Alleluia’s again, rejoicing in God’s triumph over sin, death, and hell--just one week later our Gospel reading shows the church to be a pitiful, worthless band of disciples. They should be out proclaiming the resurrection at the top of their lungs. They should be getting up into the face of the leaders of the Jews and defying them with the truth of the risen Christ. They should be strong, brave, and bold. But it’s not that way at all. It’s like, for them, Easter never took place. It’s as if Jesus was still dead. That God was against them, not with them and for them.

But are we really much different? Have we been strong, faithful, courageous soldiers of the cross? Or have we, even just this past week since Easter, lived in ways that are just the opposite? Now that Jesus is alive, and like those disciples we’ve heard the news too, has our giving improved? Our attendance in God’s House and at His Holy Table? Our desire to study the Word of Truth? Now that Jesus is alive do we treat our spouse and family with more love? Are we better witnesses for Christ at school and at work? Have we stopped holding on to that grudge and made peace?

We’re just like them, aren’t we?...those disciples behind locked doors. Our sins still lock us in because we allow them to. We hold on to our greed, and selfishness, and pride. Easter comes and goes, but life for us is just like always. If Christ is risen and we believe that we will live with Him, then why don’t we live with Him now? Why isn’t His Word of Life a central part of our life now? Why don’t we, as this Sunday’s Introit urges, “Like newborn babies, long for the pure spiritual milk (of the Word)”? Why is it hard for others to see the Risen Christ in us?

And here’s something to think about...If others cannot see that Easter, the Risen Lord, makes a difference to us in how we live, and forgive, worship, and give, why would they want to be a part of our congregation? Would you have wanted to join that sorry-looking bunch of disciples behind locked doors? Then why would others want to join us if we act in the same way?

We really are no different from Thomas, Peter, and all the rest. But here is the good news--Jesus is no different toward us than he was toward them. He greeted them with peace, and that’s how He greets you. They did not deserve it, nor do we. He should come here and punish us, then forsake us. But He doesn’t. “Peace be with you,” He says. You heard these words after confessing your sins. God is

at peace with you, was His answer..."I forgive you all your sins." You will hear these same words later on. As I turn toward you with the body and blood of Christ, I speak to you His words of peace. And giving you these words, He gives you His flesh and blood. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the marks of the nails and spear in the flesh of their Lord. Those same marks are here for you. This Supper is living proof that Jesus died for you and that He now lives. Here He strengthens your faith. Here He deals with your weaknesses. Here His risen body and blood enters into you to help you live the risen life with Him.

When Jesus came to His disciples that day He breathed out His Spirit on them. He gives you that same Spirit today...unless we are rejecting His Spirit by refusing to forgive others; by being unwilling to repent and turn away from our sins. Jesus' Spirit is breathed out upon you here to cause you to be faithful, to motivate you in your giving, to create within you a desire for God's gifts, to make you hunger for His living Word. Jesus' Spirit within you opens up those sinful locks to your heart. He gives you real joy and helps you daily to be a committed disciple.

Jesus is no less patient with you than He was with those men behind locked doors. And Jesus is no less forgiving. Since you are here today, I hope that it is because you need forgiveness. Perhaps this past week has been unkind to you. You may have done things of which you are not proud. Sometimes all of us wish we could turn back the clock and start over. Those pitiful men in that safe-house felt the same way. But they could not go back to the Garden and be courageous with Jesus. They could not stand by Him all over again. Peter could not undo his denials. Thomas could not get rid of his unbelief. None of them could remove their fears and weaknesses. They were locked, not just within that house; they were locked in by the guilt of their past, and by their fears of the future.

And if this is you in any way, believe this with all your heart--Jesus is as much here with you now as He was with them. And as He forgave them, so He forgives you. He forgives you for all of it..all the sins of your past, all your weaknesses, and failures, and fears. God is at peace with you, period. He holds no grudge. He harbors no anger. He is not against you, He is for you.

And if this does not open the locks to your heart and life, nothing will. But it does...Jesus does. He removes guilt and fears. He undoes shackles and chains. He unloads burdens. He did it for His disciples then; He does it for you now. Look at these same men in our Acts reading for today. They do get right up into the face of the Jewish Council. "We must obey God rather than men!" they tell them. The Jews have swords, clubs, whips, and spears. Are Peter, John, and the others afraid? No. Jesus had removed their fear. He turned this band of pitiful, sorry-looking disciples into true soldiers of the cross.

And He is doing that same thing here. I do see here before me heroes in the Faith. Men, women, and children who cling to God's promises in Christ despite the tornados and floods, despite your sicknesses and diseases, despite the temptations all around you to forsake the Lord, despite all the problems in your life. You may not feel like God's soldiers at all. Or you may feel like soldiers who are, at best, limping along, just barely making it. And perhaps this is so. Then let today's story comfort and encourage you. Those disciples were defeated in every way. But Jesus was with them and He was for them. And He turned them into His warriors. Within them and through them He worked, and Jesus' church grew.

What can we do here in Augusta, Missouri? That's the wrong question. It's, What can Jesus do in us and through us? If you know that Jesus lives, if you like newborn babies, long for His pure spiritual milk--no matter how defeated you feel, no matter how sinful--for you are forgiven, no matter how

small our band of Christian soldiers, Jesus will work to accomplish what He desires within us and through us. Amen.