

In the name of our risen Savior, Jesus Christ, dear friends,

A number of years ago, I was serving on our church body's Campus Ministry Committee, which involved some travel because we visited different campus ministries around the country. When we held our meetings at Michigan State University, the hotel we stayed at happened to be right down the street from where my 90-something year old grandmother lived at a Lutheran assisted living home. I wanted to surprise her and my Uncle Don, who lived nearby, agreed not to tell her I was coming. He picked me up and took me by to see her. She was getting her hair done in the on-site salon and while her head was turned and she was engrossed in conversation, I slid into a chair close to her and quietly waited. As the beautician turned her chair, she faced me...and she looked at me, then at the stylist, then back to me.

*"No, it can't be!" she said.*

*"It's me, grandma!"*

*"I can't believe it!"*

*"No, it's really me." I said.*

She could hardly believe that I came from Arizona and just showed up out of the blue. And she didn't even see me come into the room! But there I was.

I probably don't have to explain the parallel to our gospel lesson for today. Shock, disbelief, surprise, joy—all were feelings felt by the disciples on Easter Sunday as they sat in that locked room and the risen Jesus suddenly appeared there with them.

The disciples had the *"This is too good to be true!"* kind of surprise and joy. But the one who wasn't there—Thomas—had the *"I really don't believe it"* kind of reaction when he heard his friends say that Jesus was alive. The details and words of Jesus and their reactions are all recorded for us, people who may have similar feelings. We may have questions. We may have doubts. We may even think that peace with God is too good to be true. We may not be clear on what our role is as Jesus' disciples. So to our doubts, our hesitations, our questioning, God says:

**NO, REALLY!**

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| 1. Christ is <u>really</u> risen!           | (19-20, 24-30a) |
| 2. You <u>really</u> are at peace with God! | (19, 21, 26)    |
| 3. You <u>really</u> have eternal life!     | (31)            |
| 4. You <u>really</u> are sent!              | (21b-23)        |

Even when we try, it is difficult for us to truly put ourselves in the place of the disciples—the eleven men and the women whose names we know and nameless others who followed Jesus and trusted that he was the Savior. They saw him tortured like something we might see on CNN or Fox News. They saw him nailed to a wooden cross and hanging there. They saw his breath become labored and his body sag. They heard him say, **"It is finished."** And they saw his limp and lifeless body removed from the cross and taken and placed in a tomb and sealed up. And those who didn't see it all or didn't see parts of that whole spectacle heard about it from those who did. Sadness, confusion, anger at their own people—the Jews, as well as the Romans...now what would they do? What should they do?

It occurred to them—at least the 10 apostles and probably some others—that these same Jewish leaders who were able to get the death penalty for Jesus, whom the Roman governor even admitted had done nothing wrong, might come after them because they followed and supported him. How frightening it must have been to think that they might drag *you* away, strip you bare, whip you till your flesh was in ribbons and then nail you to a post and wait for you to die. Can you blame them for

staying shut in a locked room after seeing that happen to Jesus on Friday? Saturday was the Sabbath, so things were quiet. Now here it was Sunday evening and they remained there in that room. Would temple guards or Roman soldiers come knocking on the door? And not only that, but they had invested themselves body and soul in Jesus. What would their purpose in life be now? If you've ever had a faith crisis where you doubted the Bible to be the actual Word of God and seriously questioned that Jesus was the way of salvation, perhaps you somewhat know that feeling.

So they are in the locked room and then, out of nowhere, Jesus appeared among them! Luke's gospel tells us that they thought they were seeing a ghost. But his hands and his side told the story. Nail wounds, a gash from a spear. There was no denying that this was Jesus, that he had risen from death! He was standing right in front of them bearing the marks of forgiveness and salvation! They were overcome with joy at the realization that Jesus was alive. But someone was missing.

For some reason, Thomas wasn't there in the room. Can you imagine the smiles and excitement on the faces of the other disciples when Thomas returned and they shared with him the news of Jesus' resurrection? I'm imagining them all talking at once, each eager to tell the story of locked doors and crucifixion wounds and the words he spoke. Their clear message to Thomas was **"We have seen the Lord!"**

But this account is why we call him "Doubting Thomas." The news that Jesus proved himself to be the promised Lamb of God who sacrificed himself for the sin of the world and rose again should have caused Thomas to rejoice, but it didn't. **"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."** For a week Thomas saw the happiness and confidence in the others while he stubbornly refused to take their word for it and trust in the risen Christ.

Have you ever been in that place...where you heard other Christians tell you the truth of something God says and you can see that they really believe it, but you doubt it or simply refuse to listen and trust them? If so, you're a bit like Thomas. And I hope, like Thomas, you have since come—or will come—to the realization that God's Word is true and reliable.

That happened for Thomas a week later when he realized that CHRIST HAD REALLY RISEN. The situation was the same as the week before—except that Thomas was in the room. Jesus appeared and **said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"**

You know, Thomas received what people today cannot have—visible proof that CHRIST IS REALLY RISEN. The Savior indulged him and his stubborn refusal to believe what Jesus told them would happen and what his friends told him *did* happen. Christ graciously allowed Thomas to inspect the visible evidence of his death and see that he was now very much alive. The prophets were right. Jesus was right. The disciples were right. Thomas finally believed. The Savior then answered Thomas' confession of faith saying, **"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

You and I don't get to witness the wounds or poke into his pierced flesh. We are blessed when we read the Bible and have faith in it when it says that CHRIST IS REALLY RISEN!

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On both Easter evening and a week later when Jesus appeared to his disciples, he said **"Peace be with you!"** That common greeting meant a whole lot more coming from Jesus and coming after his resurrection! It was just the Thursday before his death that Jesus said to his disciples, **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."** (John 14:27)

The speaker and the context told them that THEY REALLY WERE AT PEACE WITH GOD and the same is true for those who follow Jesus today! Our Savior gives a peace that far surpasses any worldly peace. It's more than just no kids fighting on the playground, no yelling or arguments at home, no wars between countries. The peace that Jesus brings is so much greater than that!

As you look at this gospel account, you can find sin in those disciples—fear that revealed a lack of trust in God, confusion instead of remembering Jesus' words, doubt instead of faith. You and I struggle with those same things, even though, like Thomas and the rest, we should know better. Those kinds of sins are just as damning as immorality or murder or anything else. The soul who sins is the soul who dies, according to God. Sin prevents peace between God and us.

That's what makes Jesus life, death and resurrection so important—he establishes peace with God for us because the nail marks and spear gash and the giving up of his life paid for our sin and his empty tomb secured *our* victory over the grave. It seems too good to be true, but it is true—those who trust in Christ's work get the credit for his work—really! So God looks at us and sees us as his perfect children and a peace between him and us is reality. YOU REALLY ARE AT PEACE WITH GOD by faith in Jesus! This is a peace that transcends all understanding. It is a peace that guards our hearts and minds.

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You have that peace right now. You have God's love every day by faith in his Son. He is with you at all times—even if you cannot see him as the disciples did in that room. You can live with a confidence that all is well between you and the almighty and holy God of heaven and earth. And this peace that you live in now lasts forever. It REALLY lasts forever—literally...for eternity!

You realize this is the reason the Scriptures were written and preserved by God, right? We have the Bible so that we can realize the sin Jesus came to take away and know that he did take it away with the result that all who trust in him have peace with God that extends into eternal life. You may have noticed the words at the end of our text are words that are included in one of the orders of service that we use on Sundays: **these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** YOU REALLY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE because Jesus earned it for you.

Easter proclaims without a doubt that the grave that couldn't hold Jesus can't hold you either. Death is not the end of everything. We sometimes talk about death being like walking through the door to heaven. We leave this world and enter the eternal kingdom of God. Don't be a "Doubting Thomas" when it comes to the resurrection! Even the finest Christian has had those moments where he or she considers, toys with the thought, that maybe death *is* the end. Maybe nothing happens; we just cease to exist. Maybe the Bible isn't right. Trust what you see on pages of the Bible. Trust that those wounds that Thomas investigated were real and that Jesus really conquered death. Trust what Jesus says—**"Because I live, you also will live."** YOU REALLY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE by faith in the risen Savior!

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Along with the New Testament, history and tradition give us bits and pieces about the disciples who witnessed the resurrected Jesus. They were all commissioned by Jesus to share the forgiveness he earned, the forgiveness that brings peace with God. They all did that, even to the point of giving their lives, dying for their faith and their message of salvation by faith in Christ. The only exception to martyrdom was John. That means even Doubting Thomas was Christ's missionary. Tradition says that he went as far as India with the gospel.

Why were they all willing to share Christ with the world? In that room, Jesus said to them, **“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”** Jesus turned the spreading of the gospel and the growing of his Church over to them. He gave them the Holy Spirit who would motivate and empower them to do this work. You just heard what is at the heart of the Church’s work—the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus earned forgiveness for the whole world and all who trust in Christ’s perfect life and his death on the cross and his rising from death, who repent of their sins and look to Christ have forgiveness. The role of Jesus’ disciples then and today is to help others find that forgiveness. **YOU REALLY ARE SENT** just as they were. Many of you will recall that the term that is given to this job of announcing forgiveness to the person who repents and not announcing forgiveness to the person who does not is called the Ministry of the Keys. Christ handed over the keys to heaven’s gate to his people—he **REALLY** did!

In our baptisms and in our hearing of his Word, God has given *us* the Holy Spirit. He says that the Holy Spirit *lives* in us. He motivates and empowers us to do Christ’s work today as those disciples did then. This is a great responsibility—to handle forgiveness properly with one another, to faithfully represent God. And yet, we are called to it as they were.

Very practically speaking, that means we are obligated at times to tell a person things they don’t want to hear, like that what they’re doing goes directly against what God says. And what comes next depends on what they say.

If there is acknowledgement that it is wrong and there is repentance—which means a trust in Jesus to forgive and an intention to change what is wrong—then we assure them that they are forgiven. In that moment, it is as if the door to heaven is unlocked and opened for them!

If it goes the other way, however... If there is a rejection of what God says and an unwillingness to change, then we have the obligation to point out that the person is still in their sins and because they are rejecting God and his will for them, their eternal life hangs in the balance. Ongoing, unrepentant sin leads not to heaven, but to hell. It is, in effect, as if the door to heaven is closed and locked for that person.

God takes sin seriously, seriously enough to send his one and only Son to give his life that we might be saved from it. **YOU REALLY ARE SENT** to explain this to others and help them. It’s not just a pastor’s job; it is something every Spirit-filled Christian is called to do. We sometimes consider this work as burdensome, but we really shouldn’t. Jesus calls us to do it so that people can find the wonderful forgiveness and peace and eternal life he earned for us and announced with his Easter resurrection. That is a noble calling. It changes people lives in this world and for eternity.

It can be a lot to take in, a lot to trust—that Jesus really did rise from death, that it really does mean that we have peace with God, that we really do have eternal life, that we really have been entrusted with the message of forgiveness and are sent to share it with others. We have our weak moments when we’re afraid like the disciples, when we doubt like Thomas, but we have a Savior who assures us and forgives us and puts us to work for him. Be thankful for his grace and live with the confidence the disciples had after they saw the risen Christ. Amen.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.