

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The acclamation bears witness: we continue to celebrate Easter today and in the weeks ahead, even as Peter and the apostles proclaimed Jesus' resurrection as they went forth as Jesus' witnesses "*to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). As we heard today: "*And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.*"

It's the evening of "*the first day of the week*" in our Gospel, the day of Jesus' resurrection. Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb early that same morning and had found the stone rolled away that had covered the opening to the tomb. She ran to find the disciples, and found Peter and John, who ran to the tomb to see for themselves. All was just as Mary reported.

They looked inside the tomb and discovered that it was empty; Jesus wasn't there; only the burial cloths were ... not crumpled but folded up and lying where Jesus had lain.

Jesus had told them He would rise. It was three days after Joseph and Nicodemus had laid Jesus in the grave. They should have understood, but they didn't. They didn't understand Jesus ... they didn't understand the Scripture: Jesus "*must rise from the dead*" (John 20:9). They didn't understand ... they didn't believe. And make no mistake, unbelief is sin — Peter's, John's, and later, Thomas'!

But that misunderstanding would be erased for most of them on the evening of that first day of the week. Jesus came and stood among the disciples. With His ability to apply an illocal mode of presence (see FoC, SD VII:100) — like He used when He exited from the tomb earlier that same day — Jesus passed through the locked door "*where the disciples were for fear of the Jews.*"

He stood among them and spoke to them. And He "*showed them [the wounds in] his hands and his side.*" This was not some group illusion made up by grief-stricken disciples; this was not some disembodied spirit that floated into the room; this was Jesus Christ, the Crucified one, standing in the flesh before them, alive, risen from the dead.

The disciples were glad, and they confessed: "*We have seen the Lord.*" Of course, as you heard again: Thomas wasn't there that evening — we recount that story on the Second Sunday of Easter, every year. Not only did he not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, but he also didn't believe the testimony of his fellow disciples — yes, he also sinned in unbelief. But, I don't want to spend much time on Thomas today. Suffice it to say that, when Thomas had the same opportunity to hear Christ crucified and see His wounds, his misunderstanding, too, was erased.

But salvation comes not by mere understanding, and the Gospel is not preached for the purpose of gaining knowledge. The Gospel is preached that we might be saved through faith — *“from faith for faith”* (Rom. 1:17). *“For by grace you have been saved through faith”* (Eph. 2:8); *“all ... are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift ... to be received by faith”* (Rom. 3:23-25). *“[I]f you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”* (Rom. 10:9).

And the Gospel is that Christ, the Crucified one has, “[b]y His death, ... made satisfaction for our sins” (AC, IV:2). The disciples needed to see the resurrected Jesus as the One who had been wounded for them on that cross, that they might believe that *“He is the propitiation for [their] sins,”* as He is for ours, *“and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”*

The Gospel is that *“the blood of Jesus [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin,”* that we *“have redemption [in God’s beloved Son], the forgiveness of sins”* (Col. 1:14), that when *“we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

The Gospel is that “People are freely justified — declared righteous, sins forgiven — for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake” (AC, IV:2).

The Gospel is that this faith comes as the Holy Spirit works faith in us as we hear the Gospel.

The disciples saw and heard that evening. They saw the Crucified and Risen one standing there before them; Thomas did, too, a week later. But more than that, they heard the Gospel words: *“Peace be with you.”* In fact, so important were these words that Jesus repeated them to the disciples, and then again when Thomas was with them. *“Peace be with you.”*

Those are words of forgiveness, for forgiveness implies peace ... reconciliation. As St. Paul says, *“in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them”* (2 Cor. 5:19). Again, forgiveness implies peace, for forgiveness comes from believing in Christ’s atoning work, *“so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Cor. 5:21). And with that faith comes peace. Again, listen to St. Paul: righteousness *“will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Rom. 4:24–5:1).

The disciples believed and confessed: *“We have seen the Lord.”* That is, we’re forgiven. We’re at peace. Similarly Thomas: he believed and confessed: *“My Lord and my God!”* He was forgiven; he was at peace.

In fact, so important was this message of peace to Jesus that He established an office in His church to convey it to us. He “*gave us the ministry of reconciliation,*” and has entrusted “*to us the message of reconciliation*” (2 Cor. 5:18-19). That is, God has given His church pastors to go forth with forgiveness on their lips. Indeed, the words Jesus spoke today to His disciples are His words instituting this office: “*‘As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’*”

In catechism language, we call this the Office of the Keys. It’s part of God’s superabundant grace by which He gives us “counsel and aid against sin” (Smalcald Articles, Third Part, IV). And “[w]hat do [we] believe according to these words?

“[We] believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself” (Small Catechism, Office of the Keys).

This is what you call your pastor to do: to forgive sins ... in private settings — we call it private confession. And you don’t have to worry about what your pastor might think of you. He already knows you are like he is, and like we all confess publicly, “a poor, miserable sinner.” He is glad to declare you forgiven, not for his sake, but for Christ’s, just as he proclaims this forgiveness in Christ as he preaches to you publicly. You call your pastor also to baptize — for sins are washed away in this water with the word; and to serve you “the holy Sacrament of the Altar” where Christ’s body and blood, “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,” are distributed to you and eaten by you.

Yes, this office of the ministry is an office empowered by the Holy Spirit to distribute Christ’s forgiveness. He won that forgiveness by His cross and resurrection; He distributes that forgiveness through the Gospel and sacraments. For like the disciples — including Thomas — today, we struggle with sin, including unbelief, and we need to hear the Gospel over and over again. We need to hear that God “*is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” We need to hear: “the peace of the Lord be with you always.” Listen for it. These are the risen Jesus’ words to you today, words of forgiveness to you, His disciples.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!